

DOSSIER No. 113.

607/84

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LOVE'S STRATAGEMS.
MEN OF THE DESK.
THE GILDED CLIQUE.
HAZARDOUS MARRIAGES.

THE LITTLE OLD MAN OF BATIGNOLLES.

VIZETELLY & CO., 42 Catherine Street, Strand.

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GABORIAU'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

VII.

DOSSIER No. 113.

By EMILE GABORIAU.

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DOSSIER No. 113.

I.

IN the Paris evening papers of February 28, 186—, there appeared the following intelligence:—

“A daring robbery, committed during the night at one of our most eminent bankers’, M. André Fauvel, has created great excitement this morning throughout the neighbourhood of the Rue de Provence. The thieves, who were as skilful as they were bold, succeeded in effecting an entrance to the bank, in forcing the lock of a safe that has heretofore been considered impregnable, and in possessing themselves of the enormous sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs in bank-notes. The police, immediately informed of the robbery, displayed their accustomed zeal, and their efforts have been crowned with success. Already, it is said, P. B., a clerk in the bank, has been arrested, and there is every reason to hope that his accomplices will be speedily overtaken by the hand of justice.”

For four days this robbery was the talk of Paris. Then public attention was absorbed by later and equally interesting events; an acrobat broke his leg at the circus; an actress made her *début* at a small theatre; and the news of the 28th was soon forgotten.

But for once the newspapers were—perhaps intentionally—wrong, or at least inaccurate in their information. The sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs had certainly been stolen from M. André Fauvel’s bank, but not in the manner described. A clerk had also been arrested on suspicion, but no decisive proof had been forthcoming against him. This robbery of unusual importance remained, if not inexplicable, at least unexplained.

The following are the facts of the case as related with scrupulous exactitude in the official police report.

II.

The banking-house of M. André Fauvel, No. 87 Rue de Provence, is an important establishment, and, owing to its large staff of clerks, presents very much the appearance of a government department. On the ground-floor are the offices, with windows opening on the street, protected by iron bars sufficiently strong and close together to discourage all burglarious attempts. A large glass door opens into a spacious vestibule, where three or four messengers are always in waiting. On the right are the rooms to which the public is admitted, and from which a narrow passage leads to the head cashier’s office. The offices of the corresponding clerks, the ledger clerk, and general accounts are on the left. At the farther end is a small

glazed court with which seven or eight small wickets communicate. These are kept closed, except only on particular days when a considerable number of payments have to be made, and then they are indispensable.

M. Fauvel's private office is on the first floor over the general offices, and leads into his handsome private apartments. This office communicates directly with the bank by means of a dark, narrow staircase, which opens into the room occupied by the head cashier. This latter room is completely proof against all burglarious attacks, no matter how skilfully planned; indeed, it could almost withstand a regular siege, sheeted as it is like a monitor. The doors, and the partition in which the wicket is where payments are made, are covered with thick iron plates; and a heavy grating protects the fireplace. Fastened in the wall by enormous iron clamps is a safe, a formidable and fantastic piece of furniture, calculated to fill with envy the poor devil who carries his fortune easily enough in a pocket-book. This safe, considered the masterpiece of the well-known house of Becquet, is six feet in height and four and a half in width, and is made entirely of wrought iron, with triple sides, and divided into isolated compartments in case of fire.

The safe is opened by an odd little key, which is, however, the least important part of the mechanism. Five movable steel buttons, upon which are engraved all the letters of the alphabet, constitute the real power of the ingenious lock. To open the safe it is requisite, before inserting the key, to replace the letters on the buttons in the same order in which they were when the door was locked. In M. Fauvel's bank, as elsewhere, it was always closed with a word that was changed from time to time. This word was known only to the head of the bank and the chief cashier, each of whom had a key to the safe. In such a stronghold, a person might deposit more diamonds than the Duke of Brunswick possessed, and sleep well, assured as he would be of their safety. But one danger seemed to threaten—that of forgetting the secret word which was the "Open, sesame," of the iron barrier.

About half-past nine o'clock on the morning of the 28th of February, the bank clerks were all busy at their various desks, when a middle-aged man of dark complexion and military air, clad in deep mourning, appeared in the office adjoining that of the head cashier, and expressed a desire to see him.

He was told that the cashier had not arrived, and his attention was called to a placard in the entry, which stated that the cashier's office opened at ten o'clock.

This reply seemed to disconcert and annoy the new-comer. "I expected," he said, in a tone of cool impertinence, "to find some one here ready to attend to my business. I explained the matter to M. Fauvel yesterday. I am Count Louis de Clameran, owner of iron-works at Oloron, and have come to receive three hundred thousand francs deposited in this bank by my late brother, whose heir I am. It is surprising that no direction has been given about it."

Neither the title of the noble manufacturer, nor his explanations, appeared to have the slightest effect upon the clerks. "The head cashier has not yet arrived," they repeated, "and we can do nothing for you."

"Then conduct me to M. Fauvel."

There was a moment's hesitation; then a clerk named Cavillon, who was writing near the window, said: "The chief is always out at this hour."

"I will call again, then," replied M. de Clameran. And he walked out, as he had entered, without saying "Good morning," or even raising his hat.

"Not very polite, that customer," said little Cavaillon; "but he is unlucky, for here comes Prosper."

Prosper Bertomy, head cashier of Fauvel's banking-house, was a tall, handsome man, of about thirty, with fair hair and large dark-blue eyes, fastidiously neat in appearance, and dressed in the height of fashion. He would have been very prepossessing but for a cold, reserved English-like manner, and a certain air of self-sufficiency, which spoiled his naturally bright and open countenance.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Cavaillon. "Some one has just been asking for you."

"Who? An ironmaster, was it not?"

"Exactly."

"Well, he will come back again. Knowing that I should be late this morning, I made all my arrangements yesterday." Prosper had unlocked his office-door, and, as he finished speaking, entered, and closed it behind him.

"Good!" exclaimed one of the clerks; "there is a man who never lets anything disturb him. The chief has quarrelled with him twenty times for always coming too late, and his remonstrances have no more effect upon him than a breath of wind."

"And quite right too; he knows he can get anything he wants out of the chief."

"Besides, how could he come any sooner? A man who sits up all night, and leads a fast life, doesn't feel inclined for work early in the morning, Did you notice how pale he looked when he came in?"

"He must have been playing heavily again. Couturier says he lost fifteen hundred francs at a sitting last week."

"His work is none the worse done for all that," interrupted Cavaillon. "If you were in his place—"

He stopped short. The door of the cashier's office suddenly opened, and the cashier appeared before them with tottering step, and a wild, haggard look on his ashy pale face. "Robbed!" he gasped out; "I have been robbed!"

Prosper's horrified expression, his hollow voice and trembling limbs, so alarmed the clerks that they jumped off their stools and ran towards him. He almost dropped into their arms; he was sick and faint, and sank into a chair. His companions surrounded him, and begged him to explain himself. "Robbed?" they said; "where, how, by whom?"

Gradually, Prosper recovered himself. "All the money I had in the safe," he said, "has been stolen."

"All?"

"Yes, all; three rolls, each containing one hundred notes of a thousand francs, and one roll of fifty thousand. The four rolls were wrapped in a sheet of paper and tied together."

With the rapidity of lightning, the news of the robbery spread throughout the banking-house, and the room was soon filled with curious inquirers.

"Tell us, Prosper," said young Cavaillon, "has the safe been broken open?"

"No; it is just as I left it."

"Well, then, how could—"

"All I know is that yesterday I placed three hundred and fifty thousand francs in the safe, and this morning they are gone."

A deep silence ensued, which was at length broken by an old clerk, who

did not seem to share the general consternation. "Don't distress yourself, M. Bertomy," he said; "no doubt the chief has disposed of the money."

The unhappy cashier started up with a look of relief; he eagerly caught at the suggestion. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "it must be as you say; the chief must have taken it." But, after thinking a few minutes, he remarked in a tone of deep discouragement: "No, that is impossible. During the five years that I have had charge of the safe, M. Fauvel has never opened it excepting in my presence. Whenever he has needed money, he has either waited until I came, or has sent for me, rather than take it in my absence."

"Well," said Cavailon, "before despairing, let us ascertain the truth."

But a messenger had already informed M. Fauvel of the disaster, and as Cavailon was about to go in quest of him, he entered the office.

M. André Fauvel appeared to be a man of fifty, inclined to corpulency, of medium height, with iron-grey hair; and, like all hard workers, he had a slight stoop. Never did he by a single action belie the kindly expression of his face. He had a frank air, a lively, intelligent eye, and full, red lips. Born in the neighbourhood of Aix, he betrayed, when animated, a slight Provençal accent that gave a peculiar flavour to his genial humour. The news of the robbery had extremely agitated him, for his usually florid face was now quite pale. "What is this I hear? what has happened?" he said to the clerks, who respectfully stood aside when he entered the office.

The sound of M. Fauvel's voice inspired the cashier with the factitious energy called forth by a great crisis. The dreaded and decisive moment had come; he arose, and advanced towards his chief. "Sir," he said, "having, as you know, a payment to make this morning, I yesterday drew from the Bank of France three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"Why yesterday?" interrupted the banker. "I think I have a hundred times ordered you to wait until the day payment has to be made."

"I know it, sir, and I did wrong to disobey you. But the mischief is done. Yesterday evening I locked the money up: it has disappeared, and yet the safe has not been broken open."

"You must be mad!" exclaimed M. Fauvel; "you are dreaming!"

These few words destroyed all hope; but the very horror of the situation imparted to Prosper, not the coolness of a matured resolution, but that sort of stupid, stolid indifference which often results from unexpected catastrophes. It was with apparent calmness that he replied: "I am not mad; neither, unfortunately, am I dreaming: I am simply telling the truth."

This tranquillity at such a moment appeared to exasperate M. Fauvel. He seized Prosper by the arm, and shook him roughly. "Speak!" he exclaimed; "speak! who can have opened the safe?"

"I cannot say."

"No one but you and I know the secret word. No one but you and I possess keys."

This was a formal accusation; at least, all the auditors present so understood it. Yet Prosper's strange calmness never left him for an instant. He quietly released himself from M. Fauvel's grasp, and slowly said: "In other words, sir, it is only I who could have taken this money—"

"Miserable man," exclaimed M. Fauvel.

Prosper drew himself up to his full height, and, looking M. Fauvel full in the face, added: "Or you!"

The banker made a threatening gesture; and there is no knowing what would have happened if he had not been interrupted by loud and angry

voices in the hall. A man insisted upon entering in spite of the protestations of the messengers, and succeeded in forcing his way in. It was M. de Clameran.

The clerks stood looking on, bewildered and motionless. The silence was profound and solemn. It was easy to perceive that some terrible question was being anxiously weighed by all these men.

The iron-master did not appear to observe anything unusual. He advanced, and without lifting his hat said, in his former impertinent tone : "It is after ten o'clock, gentlemen."

No one answered ; and M. de Clameran was about to continue, when turning round, he for the first time saw the banker, and walking up to him exclaimed, "Well, sir, I congratulate myself upon finding you in at last. I have been here once before this morning, and found the cashier's office not opened, the cashier not arrived, and you absent."

"You are mistaken, sir, I was in my office."

"At any rate, I was told you were out ; that gentleman there assured me of the fact." And the iron-master pointed out Cavaillon. "However, that is of little importance," he went on to say. "I return, and this time not only the cashier's office is closed, but I am refused admittance to the banking-house, and find myself compelled to force my way in. Be so good as to tell me whether I can have my money."

M. Fauvel's pale face turned red with anger as he listened to this harangue ; yet he controlled himself. "I should be obliged to you, sir," he said in a low voice, "for a short delay."

"I thought you told me—"

"Yes, yesterday. But this morning—this very instant—I find I have been robbed of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

M. de Clameran bowed ironically, and asked : "Shall I have to wait long?"

"Long enough for me to send to the Bank of France."

Then, turning his back on the iron-founder, M. Fauvel said to his cashier : "Write a cheque and send to the Bank at once to draw out all the available money. Let the messenger take a cab." Prosper remained motionless. "Do you hear me?" inquired the banker angrily.

The cashier started ; he seemed as if awakening from a dream. "It is useless to send," he said in a slow, measured tone : "this gentleman requires three hundred thousand francs, and there is less than one hundred thousand at the Bank."

M. de Clameran appeared to expect this answer, for he muttered : "Of course." Although he only pronounced these words, his voice, his manner, his countenance clearly said : "This comedy is well acted ; but nevertheless it is a comedy, and I don't intend to be duped by it."

Alas ! After Prosper's answer, and the iron-master's coarsely-expressed opinion, the clerks knew not what to think. The fact was, that Paris had just been startled by several financial crashes. The thirst for speculation had caused the oldest and most reliable houses to totter. Men of the most unimpeachable honour had to sacrifice their pride, and go from door to door imploring aid. Credit, that rare bird of security and peace, rested with none, but stood, with upraised wings, ready to fly off at the first rumour of suspicion.

This idea of a comedy arranged beforehand between the banker and his cashier might therefore readily occur to the minds of people who, if not suspicious, were at least aware of all the expedients resorted to by speculators in order to gain time, which with them often meant salvation.

M. Fauvel had had too much experience not to instantly divine the impression produced by Prosper's answer; he read the most mortifying doubt on the faces around him. "Oh! don't be alarmed, sir," said he to M. de Clameran, "this house has other resources. Be kind enough to await my return."

He left the office, went up to his private room, and in a few minutes returned, holding in his hand a letter and a bundle of securities. "Here, quick, Couturier!" he said to one of his clerks, "take my carriage, which is waiting at the door, and go with this gentleman to M. de Rothschild. Hand the latter this letter and these securities; in exchange, you will receive three hundred thousand francs, which give to M. de Clameran."

The iron-master was visibly disappointed; he seemed desirous of apologizing for his rudeness. "I assure you," said he to M. Fauvel, "that I had no intention of giving offence. Our relations, for some years, have been such that I hope—"

"Enough, sir," interrupted the banker, "I desire no apologies. In business, friendship counts for nothing. I owe you money: I am not ready to pay: you are pressing: you have a perfect right to demand what is your own. Accompany my messenger: he will pay you your money." Then he turned to his clerks, who stood curiously gazing on, and said: "As for you, gentlemen, be kind enough to resume your places at your desks."

In an instant the office was cleared of every one excepting the clerks who habitually occupied it; and they resumed their seats at their desks with their noses almost touching the paper before them, as if they were too absorbed in their work to think of anything else.

Still excited by the events which had rapidly succeeded each other, M. André Fauvel walked up and down the room with quick, nervous steps, occasionally uttering some half stifled exclamation. Prosper remained leaning against the partition, with pale face and fixed eyes, looking as if he had lost the faculty of thinking. Finally the banker, after a long silence, stopped short before him; he had determined upon the line of conduct he would pursue. "We must have an explanation," he said. "Go into your office."

The cashier mechanically obeyed without a word; and his chief followed him, taking the precaution to close the door after them. The room bore no evidences of a successful burglary. Everything was in perfect order; not even a paper was disturbed. The safe was open, and on the top shelf lay several rouleaus of gold, overlooked or disdained by the thieves.

M. Fauvel, without troubling himself to examine anything, took a seat, and ordered his cashier to do the same. He had entirely recovered his equanimity, and his countenance wore its usual kind expression. "Now that we are alone, Prosper," he said, "have you nothing to tell me?"

The cashier started, as if surprised at the question. "Nothing, sir, that I have not already told you," he replied.

"What! nothing? Do you persist in maintaining a fable so absurd and ridiculous that no one can possibly believe it? It is sheer folly! Confide in me: it is your only chance of salvation. I am your employer, it is true; but I am before and above all your friend—your best and truest friend. I cannot forget that in this very room, fifteen years ago, you were intrusted to me by your father; and ever since that day I have had cause to congratulate myself on possessing so faithful and efficient a clerk. Yes, it is fifteen years since you came to me. I was then just commencing the foundation of my fortune. You have seen it gradually grow, step by step, from almost

nothing to its present height. As my wealth increased, I endeavoured to better your condition ; you, who, although so young, are the oldest of my clerks. At each augmentation of my fortune I increased your salary."

Never had the cashier heard M. Fauvel express himself in so feeling and paternal a manner. Prosper was silent with astonishment.

"Answer," pursued M. Fauvel, "have I not always been like a father to you? From the first day, my house has been open to you; you were treated as a member of my family; my niece Madeleine and my sons looked upon you as a brother. But you grew weary of this peaceful life. One day, a year ago, you suddenly began to shun us; and since then—"

The memories of the past thus evoked by the banker seemed too much for the unhappy cashier; he buried his face in his hands, and wept bitterly.

"A man can confide everything to his father," resumed M. Fauvel, also deeply affected. "Fear nothing. A father not only pardons, he forgets. Do I not know the terrible temptations that beset a young man in a city like Paris? There are some inordinate desires before which the firmest principles will give way, and which so pervert our moral sense as to render us incapable of judging between right and wrong. Speak, Prosper, speak!"

"What do you wish me to say?"

"The truth. When an honourable man yields, in an hour of weakness, to temptation, his first step towards atonement is confession. Say to me, Yes, I have been tempted, dazzled: the sight of these piles of gold turned my brain. I am young: I have passions."

"I!" murmured Prosper, "I!"

"Poor boy," said the banker sadly; "do you think I am ignorant of the life you have been leading since you left my roof a year ago? Can you not understand that all your fellow-clerks are jealous of you? that they do not forgive you for earning twelve thousand francs a year? Never have you committed a piece of folly without my being immediately informed of it by an anonymous letter. I could tell you the exact number of nights you have spent at the gaming-table, and the money you have squandered. Oh, envy has good eyes and a quick ear! I have great contempt for these cowardly denunciations, but was forced, not only to heed them, but to make inquiries myself. It is only right that I should know what sort of a life is led by the man to whom I intrust my fortune and my honour."

Prosper seemed about to protest against this last speech.

"Yes, my honour," insisted M. Fauvel, in a voice that a sense of humiliation rendered still more vibrating; "yes, my credit, which might have been compromised to-day by this M. de Clameran. Do you know how much I shall lose by paying him this money? And suppose I had not had the securities which I have sacrificed? you did not know I possessed them."

The banker paused, as if hoping for a confession, which, however, did not come.

"Come, Prosper, have courage, be frank! I will go upstairs. You will look again in the safe; I am sure that in your agitation you did not search it thoroughly. This evening I will return, and I am confident that, during the day, you will have found, if not the three hundred and fifty thousand francs, at least the greater portion of the amount; and to-morrow neither you nor I will remember anything about this false alarm."

M. Fauvel had risen, and was about to leave the room when Prosper arose, and seized him by the arm. "Your generosity is useless, sir," he

said bitterly ; "having taken nothing, I can restore nothing. I have searched carefully ; the bank-notes have been stolen."

"But by whom, poor fool ? by whom ?"

"By all that is sacred, I swear that it was not by me."

The banker's faced turned crimson. "Miserable wretch !" cried he, "do you mean to say that I took the money ?"

Prosper bowed his head, and did not answer.

"Ah ! it is thus, then," said M. Fauvel unable to contain himself any longer, "you dare— Then between you and me, M. Prosper Bertomy, justice shall decide. God is my witness that I have done all I could to save you. You will have yourself to thank for what follows. I have sent for the commissary of police ; he must be waiting in my room. Shall I call him down ?"

Prosper, with the fearful resignation of a man who entirely abandons himself, replied in a stifled voice : "Do as you will."

The banker was near the door, which he opened, and, after giving the cashier a last searching look, called to an office boy : "Anselme, ask the commissary of police to step down."

III.

If there is one man in the world whom no event should move or surprise, always on his guard against deceptive appearances, capable of admitting everything and explaining everything, it certainly is a Parisian commissary of police.

While the judge, from his lofty seat, applies the Code to the facts submitted to him, the commissary of police observes and watches all the odious circumstances that the law cannot reach. He is perforce the confidant of disgraceful details, domestic crimes, and tolerated vices.

If, when he entered upon his office, he had any illusions, before the end of a year they would be all dissipated. If he does not absolutely despise the human race, it is because often, side by side with abominations indulged in with impunity, he discovers sublime generosityes which remain unrewarded. He sees impudent scoundrels filching the public respect ; and he consoles himself by thinking of the modest, obscure heroes whom he has also encountered.

So often have his previsions been deceived, that he has reached a state of complete scepticism. He believes in nothing, neither in evil nor in absolute good ; not more in virtue than in vice. His experience has forced him to come to the sad conclusion, that not men, but events, are worth considering.

The commissary sent for by M. Fauvel soon made his appearance. It was with a calm air, if not one of perfect indifference, that he entered the office. He was followed by a short man dressed in a full suit of black, which was slightly relieved by a crumpled collar.

The banker, scarcely bowing, said to the commissary : "Doubtless, sir, you have been apprised of the painful circumstance which compels me to have recourse to your assistance ?"

"It is about a robbery, I believe."

"Yes ; an infamous and mysterious robbery committed in this office, from the safe you see open there, of which my cashier" (he pointed to Prosper) "alone possesses the key and the word."

This declaration seemed to arouse the unfortunate cashier from his dull

stupor. "Excuse me, sir," he said to the commissary in a low tone. "My chief also has the word and the key."

"Of course, that is understood."

The commissary at once drew his own conclusions. Evidently these two men accused each other. From their own statements, one or the other was guilty. One was the head of an important bank; the other was a simple cashier. One was the chief; the other was the clerk. But the commissary of police was too well skilled in concealing his impressions to betray his thoughts by any outward sign. Not a muscle of his face moved. Yet he became more grave, and alternately watched the cashier and M. Fauvel, as if trying to draw some satisfactory conclusion from their behaviour.

Prosper was very pale and dejected. He had dropped into a seat, and his arms hung inert on either side of the chair. The banker, on the contrary, remained standing with flashing eyes and crimson face, expressing himself with extraordinary violence. "And the importance of the theft is immense," continued he; "there is missing a fortune, three hundred and fifty thousand francs! This robbery might have had the most disastrous consequences. In times like these, the want of this sum might compromise the credit of the wealthiest banking-house in Paris."

"I believe so, if bills were falling due."

"Well, sir, I had this very day a heavy payment to make."

"Ah, really!" There was no mistaking the commissary's tone; a suspicion, the first, had evidently entered his mind.

The banker understood it; he started, and added quickly: "I met my engagements, but at the cost of a disagreeable sacrifice. I ought to add further, that if my orders had been obeyed, the three hundred and fifty thousand francs would not have been here."

"How is that?"

"I never desire to have large sums of money in my house over night. My cashier had positive orders to wait always until the last moment before drawing money from the Bank of France. I, above all, forbade him to leave large sums of money in the safe over night."

"You hear this?" said the commissary to Prosper.

"Yes, sir," replied the cashier, "M. Fauvel's statement is quite correct."

After this explanation, the suspicions of the commissary, instead of being strengthened, were dissipated. "Well," he said, "a robbery has been perpetrated, but by whom? Did the robber enter from without?"

The banker hesitated a moment. "I think not," he said at last.

"And I am certain he did not," said Prosper.

The commissary expected and was prepared for these answers; but it did not suit his purpose to follow them up immediately. "However," said he, "we must make ourselves sure of it." Turning towards his companion,—"M. Fanferlot," he said, "go and see if you cannot discover any traces that may have escaped the attention of these gentlemen."

M. Fanferlot, nicknamed "the squirrel," was indebted to his prodigious agility for his title, of which he was not a little proud. Slim and insignificant in appearance, in spite of his iron muscles, he might be taken for the under clerk of a bailiff as he walked along buttoned up to the chin in his thin black overcoat. He had one of those faces that impress us disagreeably—an odiously turned-up nose, thin lips, and little restless black eyes.

Fanferlot, who had been in the detective force for five years, burned to distinguish himself, to make for himself a name. He was ambitious. Alas! he was unsuccessful, lacking opportunity—or genius. Already, before the

commissary spoke to him, he had ferreted everywhere ; studied the doors, sounded the partitions, examined the wicket, and stirred up the ashes in the grate. "I cannot imagine," said he, "how a stranger could have effected an entrance here." He walked round the office. "Is this door closed at night ?" he inquired.

"It is always locked."

"And who keeps the key ?"

"The watchman, to whom I always gave it in charge before leaving the bank," said Prosper.

"And who," said M. Fauvel, "sleeps in the outer room on a folding-bedstead, which he unfolds at night, and folds up in the morning."

"Is he here now ?" inquired the commissary.

"Yes," replied the banker, and he opened the door, and called : "Anselme !"

This man was the favourite servant of M. Fauvel, and had lived with him for ten years. He knew that he would not be suspected ; but the idea of being connected in any way with a robbery is terrible, and he entered the room trembling like a leaf.

"Did you sleep in the next room last night ?" asked the commissary.

"Yes, sir, as usual."

"At what hour did you go to bed ?"

"About half-past ten ; I had spent the evening at a café near by, with master's valet."

"Did you hear no noise during the night ?"

"Not a sound ; and still I sleep so lightly, that if M. Fauvel comes down to the cashier's office when I am asleep, I am instantly awakened by the sound of his footsteps."

"M. Fauvel often comes to the cashier's office at night, does he ?"

"No sir ; very seldom."

"Did he come last night ?"

"No sir, I am very certain he did not ; for I was kept awake nearly all night by the strong coffee I had drunk with the valet."

"That will do ; you can retire," said the commissary.

When Anselme had left the room, Fanferlot resumed his search. He opened the door of the private staircase. "Where do these stairs lead to ?" he asked.

"To my private office," replied M. Fauvel.

"Is not that the room whither I was conducted when I first arrived ?" inquired the commissary.

"The same."

"I should like to see it," said Fanferlot, "and examine the entrance to it."

"Nothing is easier," said M. Fauvel eagerly ; "follow me, gentlemen. And you too, Prosper."

M. Fauvel's private office consisted of two rooms ; the waiting-room, sumptuously furnished and beautifully decorated, and the inner one where he transacted business. The furniture in this room was composed of a large office-table, several leather-covered chairs, and on either side of the fireplace a secretary and a bookshelf.

These two rooms had only three doors ; one opened on the private staircase, another into the banker's bedroom, and the third on to the landing. It was through this last door that the banker's clients and visitors were admitted.

M. Fanferlot examined the room at a glance. He seemed puzzled, like a man who had flattered himself with the hope of discovering some indication, and had found nothing. "Let us see the other side," he said. He passed into the waiting-room, followed by the banker and the commissary of police.

Prosper remained behind. Despite the disordered state of his mind, he could not but perceive that his situation was momentarily becoming more serious. He had demanded and accepted the contest with his chief; the struggle had commenced, and now it no longer depended upon his own will to arrest the consequences of his action. They were about to engage in a bitter conflict, utilizing all weapons, until one of the two should succumb, the loss of honour being the cost of a defeat.

In the eyes of justice who would be the innocent man? Alas! the unfortunate cashier saw only too clearly that the chances were terribly unequal, and he was overwhelmed with the sense of his own inferiority. Never had he thought that his chief would carry out his threats; for in a contest of this nature, M. Fauvel would have as much to risk as his cashier, and more to lose.

Prosper was sitting near the fireplace, absorbed in the most glooming forebodings, when the banker's bedroom-door suddenly opened, and a beautiful girl appeared upon the threshold. She was tall and slender; a loose morning gown, confined at the waist by a simple black ribbon, betrayed to advantage the graceful elegance of her figure. Her dark eyes were large and soft; her complexion had the creamy pallor of a white camellia; and her beautiful black hair, carelessly held together by a tortoiseshell comb, fell in a profusion of soft curls upon her exquisite neck. She was Madeleine, M. Fauvel's niece, of whom he had spoken not long before. Seeing Prosper in the room, where probably she had expected to find her uncle alone, she could not refrain from an exclamation of surprise: "Ah!"

Prosper started up as if he had received an electric shock. His eyes, a moment before so dull and heavy, now sparkled with joy, as if he had caught a glimpse of a messenger of hope. "Madeleine!" he cried, "Madeleine!"

The young girl was blushing crimson. She seemed about to hastily retreat, and stepped back; but, Prosper having advanced towards her, she was overcome by a sentiment stronger than her will, and extended her hand, which he took and pressed with great respect. They stood thus face to face, but with averted looks, as if they dared not let their eyes meet for fear of betraying their feelings; having much to say, and not knowing how to begin, they stood silent. Finally Madeleine murmured in a scarcely audible voice: "You, Prosper—you!"

These words broke the spell. The cashier dropped the white hand which he held, and answered bitterly: "Yes, I am Prosper, the companion of your childhood—suspected, accused of the most disgraceful theft; Prosper, whom your uncle has just delivered up to justice, and who, before the day is over, will be arrested and thrown into prison."

Madeleine, with a terrified gesture, cried in a tone of anguish: "Good heavens! Prosper, what are you saying?"

"What! mademoiselle, do you not know what has happened? Have not your aunt and cousins told you?"

"They have told me nothing. I have scarcely seen my cousins this morning; and my aunt is so ill that I felt uneasy, and came to tell my uncle. But for heaven's sake, speak: tell me the cause of your distress."

Prosper hesitated. Perhaps it occurred to him to open his heart to Madeleine, of revealing to her his most secret thoughts. A remembrance of the past checked his confidence. He sadly shook his head, and replied : "Thanks, mademoiselle, for this proof of interest, the last, doubtless, that I shall ever receive from you ; but allow me, by being silent, to spare you distress, and myself the mortification of blushing before you."

Madeleine interrupted him imperiously : "I insist upon knowing," she said.

"Alas ! mademoiselle," answered Prosper, "you will only too soon learn my misfortune and disgrace ; then, yes then, you will applaud yourself for what you have done."

She became more urgent ; instead of commanding she entreated ; but Prosper was inflexible. "Your uncle is in the adjoining room, with the commissary of police and a detective," said he. "They will soon return. I entreat you to retire, as they may not find you here." As he spoke he gently pushed her through the door, and closed it upon her.

It was time, for the next moment the commissary and M. Fauvel entered. They had visited the main entrance and the waiting-room, and had heard nothing of what had passed. But Fanferlot had heard for them. This excellent bloodhound had not lost sight of the cashier. He said to himself, "Now that my young gentleman believes himself to be alone, his face will betray him. I shall detect a smile or a wink that will enlighten me."

Leaving M. Fauvel and the commissary to pursue their investigations, he posted himself to watch. He saw the door open, and Madeleine appear upon the threshold ; he lost not a single word or gesture of the rapid scene which had passed. It mattered little that every word of this scene was an enigma. M. Fanferlot was skilful enough to complete the sentences he did not understand. As yet he only had a suspicion ; but a mere suspicion is better than nothing ; it is a point to start from. So prompt was he in building a plan upon the slightest incident, that he thought he saw in the past of these people, who were utter strangers to him, glimpses of a domestic drama. If the commissary of police is a sceptic, the detective has faith ; he believes in evil. "I understand the case now," said he to himself. "This man loves the young lady, who is really very pretty ; and, as he is handsome, I suppose his love is reciprocated. This love affair vexes the banker, who, not knowing how to get rid of the importunate lover by fair means, has to resort to foul, and plans this imaginary robbery, which is very ingenious."

Thus, to M. Fanferlot's mind, the banker had simply robbed himself, and the innocent cashier was the victim of an odious machination. But this conviction was at present of little service to Prosper. Fanferlot, the ambitious man, who had determined to obtain renown in his profession, decided to keep his conjectures to himself. "I will let the others go their way, and I'll go mine," he said. "When, by dint of close watching and patient investigation, I shall have collected proof sufficient to insure certain conviction, I will unmask the scoundrel."

He was radiant. He had at last found the crime, so long looked for, which would make him celebrated. Nothing was wanting, neither the odious circumstances, nor the mystery, nor even the romantic and sentimental element represented by Prosper and Madeleine. Success seemed difficult, almost impossible ; but Fanferlot, "the squirrel," had great confidence in his own genius for investigation.

Meanwhile, the search upstairs was completed, and every one had returned to Prosper's office. The commissary, who had seemed so calm when he first came, now looked grave and perplexed. The moment for taking a decisive part had come, yet it was evident that he hesitated. "You see, gentlemen," he began, "our search has only confirmed our first opinion." M. Fauvel and Prosper bowed assentingly.

"And what do you think, M. Fanferlot?" continued the commissary. Fanferlot did not answer. Occupied in studying the lock of the safe, he manifested signs of a lively surprise. Evidently he had just made an important discovery. M. Fauvel, Prosper, and the commissary rose, and surrounded him.

"Have you discovered any trace?" asked the banker eagerly.

Fanferlot turned round with a vexed air. He reproached himself for not having concealed his impressions. "Oh!" said he carelessly, "I have discovered nothing of importance."

"But we should like to know," said Prosper.

"I have merely convinced myself that this safe has been recently opened or shut, I know not which, with some violence and haste."

"How so?" asked the commissary, becoming attentive.

"Look, sir, at this scratch near the lock."

The commissary stooped down, and carefully examined the safe; he saw a slight scratch several inches long that had removed the outer coat of varnish. "I see the scratch," said he, "but what does it prove?"

"Oh, nothing at all!" said Fanferlot. "I just now told you it was of no importance."

Fanferlot said this, but it was not his real opinion. This scratch, undeniably fresh, had for him a signification that escaped the others. He said to himself: "This confirms my suspicions. If the cashier had stolen millions, there was no occasion for his being in a hurry; whereas the banker creeping down in the dead of the night with cat-like footsteps, for fear of awakening the man in the outer room, in order to rifle his own safe, had every reason to tremble, to hurry, to hastily withdraw the key, which, slipping out of the lock, scratched off the varnish."

Resolved to unravel alone the tangled thread of this mystery, the detective determined to keep his conjectures to himself; for the same reason he was silent as to the interview which he had witnessed between Madeleine and Prosper. He hastened to withdraw attention from the scratch upon the lock. "To conclude," he said, addressing the commissary, "I am convinced that no one outside of the bank could have obtained access to this room. The safe, moreover, is intact. No suspicious pressure has been used on the movable buttons. I can assert that the lock has not been tampered with by burglar's tools or false keys. Those who opened the safe knew the word, and possessed the key."

This formal affirmation of a man whom he knew to be skilful ended the hesitation of the commissary. "That being the case," he replied, "I must request a few moments' conversation with M. Fauvel."

"I am at your service," said the banker.

Prosper foresaw the result of this conversation. He quietly placed his hat on the table to show that he had no intention of attempting to escape, and passed into the adjoining office. Fanferlot also went out, but not before the commissary had made him a sign, and received one in return. This sign signified, "You are responsible for this man."

The detective needed no admonition to make him keep a strict watch.

His suspicions were too vague, his desire for success was too ardent, for him to lose sight of Prosper an instant. Closely following the cashier, he seated himself in a dark corner of the office, and, pretending to be sleepy, he fixed himself in a comfortable position for taking a nap, gaped until his jaw-bone seemed about to be dislocated, then closed his eyes and kept perfectly quiet.

Prosper took a seat at the desk of an absent clerk. The others were burning to know the result of the investigation; their eyes shone with curiosity, but they dared not ask a question. Unable to restrain himself any longer, little Cavaillon, Prosper's defender, ventured to say: "Well, who stole the money?"

Prosper shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody knows," he replied.

Was this conscious innocence or hardened recklessness? The clerks observed with bewildered surprise that Prosper had resumed his usual manner—that sort of icy haughtiness that kept people at a distance, and made him so unpopular in the bank. Save the death-like pallor of his face, and the dark circles around his swollen eyes, he bore no traces of the pitiable agitation he had exhibited a short time before. Never would a stranger entering the office have supposed that this young man, idly lounging in a chair and toying with a pencil, was resting under an accusation of robbery, and was about to be arrested. He soon stopped playing with the pencil, and drew towards him a sheet of paper upon which he hastily wrote a few lines.

"Ah, ha!" thought Fanferlot, the squirrel, whose hearing and sight were wonderfully good in spite of his profound sleep; "eh! eh! he makes his little confidential communication on paper, I see; now we will discover something positive."

His note written, Prosper folded it carefully into the smallest possible size, and after furtively glancing towards the detective, who remained motionless in his corner, threw it across the desk to little Cavaillon with this one word—"Gipsy!"

All this was so quickly and skilfully done that Fanferlot was confounded, and began to feel a little uneasy. "The devil take him!" said he to himself; "for a suffering innocent this young dandy has more pluck and nerve than many of my oldest customers. This, however, shows the result of education!"

Yes, innocent or guilty, Prosper must have been endowed with great self-control and power of dissimulation to affect this presence of mind at a time when his honour, his future happiness, all that he held dear in life, were at stake. And he was only thirty years old.

Either from natural deference, or from the hope of gaining some ray of light by a private conversation, the commissary determined to speak to the banker before acting decisively. "There is not a shadow of doubt," said he, as soon as they were alone; "this young man has robbed you. It would be a gross neglect of duty if I did not secure his person. The law will decide whether he shall be released, or sent to prison."

This declaration seemed to distress the banker. He sank into a chair, and murmured: "Poor Prosper!" Seeing the astonished look of his listener, he added: "Until to-day, I have always had the most implicit faith in my cashier's honesty, and would have unhesitatingly confided my fortune to his keeping. Almost on my knees have I besought and implored him to confess that in a moment of desperation he had taken the money, promising him pardon and forgetfulness; but I could not move him. I loved him; and

even now, in spite of the trouble and humiliation that he is bringing upon me, I cannot get myself to feel harshly towards him."

The commissary looked as if he did not understand. "What do you mean by humiliation?" he asked.

"What!" said M. Fauvel excitedly, "is not justice the same for all? Because I am the head of a bank, and he only a clerk, does it follow that my word is more to be relied upon than his? Why could I not have robbed myself? Such things have been done. They will ask me for facts; and I shall be compelled to expose the exact situation of my house, explain my affairs, disclose the secret and method of my operations."

"It is possible that you will be called upon for some explanation; but your well-known integrity—"

"Alas! He was honest too. His integrity has never been doubted. Who would have been suspected this morning if I had not been able to instantly produce a hundred thousand crowns? Who would be suspected if I could not prove that my assets exceed my liabilities by more than three millions?"

To a strictly honourable man, the thought, the possibility of suspicion tarnishing his fair name, is cruel suffering. The banker suffered, and the commissary of police saw it, and felt for him. "Be calm, sir," said he; "before the end of a week, justice will have collected sufficient proof to establish the guilt of this unfortunate man, whom we may now recall."

Prosper entered with Fanferlot—whom they had much trouble to awaken—and with the most stolid indifference listened to the announcement of his arrest. In response he calmly said: "I swear that I am innocent."

M. Fauvel, much more disturbed and excited than his cashier, made a last attempt. "It is not too late yet, poor boy," he said: "for heaven's sake reflect—"

Prosper did not appear to hear him. He drew from his pocket a small key, which he laid on the table, and said: "Here, sir, is the key of your safe. I hope for my sake that you will some day be convinced of my innocence; and I hope for your sake that the conviction will not come too late." Then as every one was silent, he resumed: "Before leaving I hand over to you the books, papers, and accounts necessary for my successor. I must at the same time inform you that, without speaking of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs, I leave a deficit in cash."

A deficit! This ominous word from the lips of a cashier fell like a bombshell upon the ears of Prosper's hearers. His declaration was interpreted in divers ways. "A deficit!" thought the commissary; "how, after this, can his guilt be doubted? Before stealing the whole contents of the safe, he has kept his hand in by occasional small thefts." "A deficit!" said the detective to himself, "now, no doubt, the very innocence of this poor devil gives his conduct an appearance of great depravity; were he guilty, he would have replaced the first money by a portion of the second."

The grave importance of Prosper's statement was considerably diminished by the explanation he proceeded to make: "There is a deficit of three thousand five hundred francs on my cash account, which has been disposed of in the following manner: two thousand taken by myself in advance on my salary; fifteen hundred advanced to several of my fellow clerks. This is the last day of the month: to-morrow the salaries will be paid, consequently—"

The commissary interrupted him—"Were you authorized to draw money whenever you wished for yourself or the clerks?"

"No ; but I knew that M. Fauvel would not have refused me permission to oblige my friends in the bank. What I did is done everywhere ; I have simply followed my predecessor's example." The banker made a sign of assent. "As regards that spent by myself," continued the cashier, "I had a sort of right to it, all of my savings being deposited in this bank ; about fifteen thousand francs."

"That is true," said M. Fauvel ; "M. Bertomy has at least that amount on deposit."

This last question settled, the commissary's errand was at an end, and his report might now be made. He announced his intention of leaving, and ordered the cashier to prepare to follow him.

Usually, the moment—when stern reality stares us in the face, when our individuality is lost, and we feel that we are being deprived of our liberty—is terrible. At the fatal command, "Follow me," which brings before our eyes the yawning prison gates, the most hardened sinner feels his courage fail, and abjectly begs for mercy. But Prosper lost none of that studied phlegm which the commissary of police secretly pronounced consummate impudence. Slowly, with as much careless ease as if going to lunch with a friend, he smoothed his hair, drew on his overcoat and gloves, and said politely : "I am ready, sir, to accompany you."

The commissary folded up his note-book, and bowing to M. Fauvel, said to Prosper, "Come with me !"

They left the room, and with a distressed face, and eyes filled with tears that he could not restrain, the banker stood watching their retreating forms. "Good heaven !" he exclaimed : "gladly would I give twice that sum to regain my old confidence in poor Prosper, and be able to keep him with me !"

The quick-eared Fanferlot overheard these words, and prompt to suspicion, and ever disposed to impute to others the deep astuteness peculiar to himself, was convinced they had been uttered for his benefit. He had remained behind the others, under pretext of looking for an imaginary umbrella, and, as he reluctantly departed, said he would call in again to see if it had been found.

It was Fanferlot's task to escort Prosper to prison ; but, as they were about starting, he asked the commissary to leave him at liberty to pursue another course, a request which his superior granted. Fanferlot had resolved to obtain possession of Prosper's note, which he knew to be in Cavaillon's pocket. To obtain this written proof, which must be an important one, appeared the easiest thing in the world. He had simply to arrest Cavaillon, frighten him, demand the letter, and, if necessary, take it by force. But to what would this lead ? To nothing but an incomplete and doubtful result.

Fanferlot was convinced that the note was intended, not for the young clerk, but for a third person. If exasperated, Cavaillon might refuse to divulge who this person was, who after all might not bear the name "Gipsy" pronounced by the cashier. And, even if he did answer his questions, would he not lie ? After mature reflection, Fanferlot decided that it would be superfluous to ask for a secret when it could be surprised. To quietly follow Cavaillon, and keep close watch on him until he caught him in the very act of handing over the letter, was but play for the detective. This method of proceeding, moreover, was much more in keeping with the character of Fanferlot, who, being naturally soft and stealthy, deemed it due to his profession to avoid all disturbance or anything resembling violence.

Fanferlot's plan was settled when he reached the vestibule. He began talking with an office-boy, and, after a few apparently idle questions, discovered that Fauvel's bank had no outlet on the Rue de la Victoire, and that consequently all the clerks were obliged to pass in and out through the main entrance in the Rue de Provence. From this moment the task he had undertaken no longer presented a shadow of difficulty. He rapidly crossed the street, and took up his position under a gateway. His post of observation was admirably chosen; not only could he see every one who entered and came out of the bank, but he also commanded a view of all the windows, and by standing on tiptoe could look through the grating, and see Cavaillon bending over his desk.

Fanferlot waited a long time, but did not wax impatient, for he had often had to remain on watch entire days and nights at a time, with much less important objects in view than the present one. Besides, his mind was busily occupied in estimating the value of his discoveries, weighing his chances, and, like Perrette with her pot of milk, building the foundation of his fortune upon present success. Finally, about one o'clock, he saw Cavaillon rise from his desk, change his coat, and take down his hat. "Very good!" he exclaimed, "my man is coming out; I must keep my eyes open."

The next moment Cavaillon appeared at the door of the bank; but before stepping on the pavement he looked up and down the street in an undecided manner.

"Can he suspect anything?" thought Fanferlot.

No, the young clerk suspected nothing; only having a commission to execute, and fearing his absence would be observed, he was debating with himself which would be the shortest road for him to take. He soon decided, entered the Faubourg Montmartre, and walked up the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette so rapidly, utterly regardless of the grumbling passers-by whom he elbowed out of his way, that Fanferlot found it difficult to keep him in sight. Reaching the Rue Chaptal, Cavaillon suddenly stopped, and entered the house numbered 39. He had scarcely taken three steps in the narrow hall when he felt a touch on his shoulder, and turning abruptly found himself face to face with Fanferlot. He recognised him at once, and turning very pale he shrank back, and looked around for means of escape. But the detective, anticipating the attempt, barred the way. Cavaillon saw that he was fairly caught. "What do you want with me?" he asked in a voice tremulous with fright.

Fanferlot was distinguished among his colleagues for his exquisite suavity and unequalled urbanity. Even with his prisoners he was the perfection of courtesy, and never was known to handcuff a man without first apologising for being compelled to do so. "You will be kind enough, my dear sir", he said, "to excuse the great liberty I take; but I really am under the necessity of asking you for a little information."

"Information! From me, sir?"

"From you, my dear sir; from M. Eugène Cavaillon."

"But I do not know you."

"Oh, yes, you must remember seeing me this morning. It is only about a trifling matter, and you will overwhelm me with obligations if you will do me the honour to accept my arm, and step outside for a moment." What could Cavaillon do? He took Fanferlot's arm, and went out with him.

The Rue Chaptal is not one of those noisy thoroughfares where foot-passengers are in perpetual danger of being run over by numberless vehicles dashing to and fro; there are but two or three shops, and from the corner

of the Rue Fontaine, occupied by an apothecary, to the entrance of the Rue Léonie, extends a high, gloomy wall, broken here and there by some small windows which light the carpenters' shops behind. It is one of those streets where you can talk at your ease, without having to step from the sidewalk every moment. So Fanferlot and Cavaillon were in no danger of being disturbed by passers-by.

"What I wished to say, my dear sir," began the detective, "is that M. Prosper Bertomy threw you a note this morning."

Cavaillon vaguely foresaw that he was to be questioned about this note, and instantly put himself on his guard. "You are mistaken," he said, blushing to his ears.

"Excuse me for presuming to contradict you, but I am quite certain of what I say."

"I assure you that Prosper never gave me anything."

"Pray, sir, do not persist in a denial; you will compel me to prove that four clerks saw him throw you a note written in pencil and closely folded."

Cavaillon saw the folly of further contradicting a man so well informed; so he changed his tactics, and said. "It is true Prosper gave me a note this morning; but as it was intended for me alone, after reading it, I tore it up, and threw the pieces in the fire."

This might be the truth. Fanferlot feared so; but how could he assure himself of the fact? He remembered that the most palpable tricks often succeed the best, and, trusting to his star, he said at hazard: "Permit me to observe that this statement is not correct; the note was entrusted to you to give to Gipsy."

A despairing gesture from Cavaillon apprised the detective that he was not mistaken; he breathed again. "I swear to you, sir—" began the young man.

"Do not swear," interrupted Fanferlot: "all the oaths in the world would be useless. You not only preserved the note, but you came to this house for the purpose of giving it to Gipsy, and it is in your pocket now."

"No, sir, no!"

Fanferlot paid no attention to this denial, but continued in his gentlest tone: "And I am sure you will be kind enough to give it to me; believe me, nothing but the most absolute necessity—"

"Never!" exclaimed Cavaillon; and, believing the moment favourable, he suddenly attempted to jerk his arm from under Fanferlot's and escape. But his efforts were vain; the detective's strength was equal to his suavity.

"Don't hurt yourself, young man," he said; "but take my advice, and quietly give up the letter."

"I have not got it."

"Very well; see, you reduce me to painful extremities, If you persist in being so obstinate, I shall call two policemen, who will take you by each arm, and escort you to the commissary of police; and, once there, I shall be under the painful necessity of searching your pockets, whether you will or not."

Cavaillon was devoted to Prosper, and willing to make any sacrifice in his behalf; but he clearly saw that it was worse than useless to struggle any longer, as he would have no time to destroy the note. To deliver it under force was no betrayal; but he cursed his powerlessness, and almost wept with rage. "I am in your power," he said, and then suddenly drew from his pocket-book the unlucky note, and gave it to the detective.

Fanferlot trembled with pleasure as he unfolded the paper ; yet, faithful to his habits of fastidious politeness, before reading it, he bowed to Cavaillon and said : " You will permit me, will you not, sir ? " Then he read as follows :—

" DEAR NINA—If you love me, follow my instructions instantly, without a moment's hesitation, without asking any questions. On the receipt of this note, take everything you have in the house, *absolutely everything*, and establish yourself in furnished rooms at the other end of Paris. Do not appear in public, but conceal yourself as much as possible. My life may depend on your obedience. I am accused of an immense robbery, and am about to be arrested. Take with you five hundred francs, which you will find in the secretary. Leave your address with Cavaillon, who will explain what I have not time to tell. Be hopeful, whatever happens. Good-bye ! —PROSPER."

Had Cavaillon been less bewildered, he would have seen blank disappointment depicted upon the detective's face after the perusal of the note. Fanferlot had cherished the hope that he was about to possess a very important document which would clearly prove the guilt or innocence of Prosper ; whereas he had only seized a love-letter written by a man who was evidently more anxious about the welfare of the woman he loved than about his own. Vainly did he puzzle over the letter, hoping to discover some hidden meaning : twist the words as he would, they proved nothing for or against the writer. The two words "*absolutely everything*" were underscored, it is true ; but they could be interpreted in so many ways. The detective, however, determined not to drop the matter here. " This Madame Nina Gipsy is doubtless a friend of M. Prosper Bertomy ? "

" She is his *particular* friend."

" Ah, I understand ; and she lives here at No. 39 ? "

" You know it well enough, as you saw me go in there."

" I suspected it to be the house, but now tell me whether the apartments she occupies are rented in her name."

" No. Prosper rents them."

" Exactly ; and on which floor, if you please ? "

" On the first."

During this colloquy, Fanferlot had folded up the note, and slipped it into his pocket. " A thousand thanks," said he, " for the information ; and, in return, I will relieve you of the trouble of executing your commission."

" Sir ! "

" Yes ; with your permission, I will myself take this note to Madame Nina Gipsy."

Cavaillon began to remonstrate, but Fanferlot cut him short by saying, " I will also venture to give you a piece of advice. Return quietly to your business and have nothing more to do with this affair."

" But Prosper is a good friend of mine, and has saved me from ruin more than once."

" Only the more reason for your keeping quiet. You cannot be of the slightest assistance to him, and I can tell you that you may be of great injury. As you are known to be his devoted friend, of course your absence at this time will be remarked upon. Any steps that you take in this matter will receive the worst interpretation."

" Prosper is innocent, I am sure."

Fanferlot was of the same opinion, but he had no idea of betraying his private thoughts ; and yet for the success of his investigations it was

necessary to impress the importance of prudence and discretion upon the young man. He would have told him to keep silent concerning what had passed between them, but he dared not.

"What you say may be true," he said. "I hope it is for the sake of M. Bertomy, and on your own account too; for, if he is guilty, you will certainly be very much annoyed, and perhaps suspected of complicity, as you are well known to be intimate with him."

Cavaillon was overcome.

"Now, you had best take my advice, and return to your business, and—Good morning, sir"

The poor fellow obeyed. Slowly and with swelling heart he returned to the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. He asked himself how he could serve Prosper, warn Madame Gipsy, and, above all, have his revenge upon this odious detective, who had just made him suffer such cruel humiliation. He had no sooner turned the corner of the street than Fanferlot entered No. 39, mentioned the name of Prosper Bertomy to the concierge, went up-stairs, and knocked at the first door he came to. It was opened by a youthful footman, dressed in the most fanciful livery.

"Is Madame Gipsy at home?" enquired Fanferlot.

The servant hesitated; seeing this, Fanferlot showed his note and said: "M. Prosper told me to hand this note to madame and wait for an answer."

"Walk in, and I will let madame know you are here."

The name of Prosper produced its effect. Fanferlot was ushered into a little room furnished in blue and gold silk damask. Heavy curtains darkened the windows, and hung in front of the doors. The floor was covered with a blue velvet pile carpet.

"Our cashier was certainly well lodged," murmured the detective. But he had no time to pursue his inventory. One of the curtains was pushed aside, and Madame Nina Gipsy stood before him. She was quite young, small, and graceful, with a brown or rather gold-coloured quadroom complexion, and the hands and feet of a child. Long curling silk lashes softened the piercing brilliancy of her large black eyes; her lips were full, and her teeth were very white. She had not yet made her toilet, but wore a velvet dressing-gown, which did not conceal the lace ruffles beneath. But she had already been under the hands of a hairdresser. Her hair was curled and frizzed high on her forehead, and confined by narrow bands of red velvet; her back hair was rolled in an immense coil, and held by a beautiful gold comb. She was ravishing. Her beauty was so startling that the dazzled detective was speechless with admiration.

"Well," he said to himself, as he remembered the noble, severe beauty of Madeleine, whom he had seen a few hours previous, "Our young gentleman certainly has good taste—very good taste—two perfect beauties!"

While he thus reflected, perfectly bewildered, and wondering how he could begin the conversation, Madame Gipsy eyed him with the most disdainful surprise: she was waiting for this shabby little man in a threadbare coat and greasy hat to explain his presence in her dainty drawing-room. She had many creditors, and was recalling them, and wondering which one had dared send this man to wipe his dusty boots on her velvet-pile carpets. After scrutinizing him from head to foot with undisguised contempt, she said haughtily, "What is it that you want?"

Any one but Fanferlot would have been offended at her insolent manner; but he only noticed it to gain some notion of the young woman's disposition. "She is bad-tempered," he thought, "and is uneducated."

While he was speculating upon her merits, Madame Nina impatiently stamped her little foot and waited for an answer; finally she said: "Why don't you speak? What do you want here?"

"I am charged, my dear madame," he answered in his softest tone, "by M. Bertomy, to give you this note."

"From Prosper! You know him then?"

"I have that honour, madame; indeed, I may be so bold as to claim him as a friend."

"What, sir! You a friend of Prosper!" exclaimed Madame Gipsy in a scornful tone, as if her pride were wounded."

Fanferlot did not condescend to notice this offensive exclamation. He was ambitious, and contempt failed to irritate him. "I said a friend of his, madame, and there are few people who would have the courage to claim friendship for him now."

Madame Gipsy was struck by the words and manner of Fanferlot. "I never could guess riddles," she said tartly: "will you be kind enough to explain what you mean?"

The detective slowly drew Prosper's note from his pocket, and, with a bow, presented it to Madame Gipsy. "Read madame," he said.

She certainly anticipated no misfortune; although her sight was excellent, she stopped to fasten a tiny gold eyeglass on her nose, then carelessly opened the note. At a glance she read its contents. She turned very pale, then very red; she trembled as if with a nervous chill; her limbs seemed to give way, and she tottered so that Fanferlot, thinking she was about to fall, extended his arms to catch her.

Useless precaution! Madame Gipsy was one of those women whose inert listlessness conceals indomitable energy; fragile-looking creatures whose powers of endurance and resistance are unlimited; cat-like in their soft grace and delicacy, especially cat-like in their nerves and muscles of steel. The dizziness caused by the shock she had received quickly passed off. She tottered, but did not fall, and stood up looking stronger than ever; seizing the wrist of the detective she held it as if her delicate little hand were a vice, and cried out: "Explain yourself! what does all this mean? Do you know anything about the contents of this note?"

Although Fanferlot showed plenty of courage in daily contending with the most dangerous rascals, he was almost terrified by the action of Madame Gipsy. "Alas!" was all he murmured.

"Prosper is to be arrested, accused of being a thief?"

"Yes, madame, he is accused of taking three hundred and fifty thousand francs from the bank-safe."

"It is false, infamous, absurd!" she cried. She had dropped Fanferlot's hand; and her fury, like that of a spoiled child, found vent in violent actions. She tore her web-like handkerchief, and the magnificent lace on her gown, to shreds. "Prosper steal!" she cried; "what a stupid idea! Why should he steal? Is he not rich?"

"M. Bertomy is not rich, madame; he has nothing but his salary."

This answer seemed to confound Madame Gipsy. "But," she insisted, "I have always seen him with plenty of money; not rich—then—" She dared not finish; but her eye met Fanferlot's, and they understood each other.

Madame Nina's look meant: "He committed this robbery in order to gratify my extravagant whims." Fanferlot's glance signified: "Very likely, madame."

A few moment's reflection restored Nina's original assurance. Doubt fled after hovering for an instant over her agitated mind. "No!" she cried. "I regret to say that Prosper would never have stolen a single sou for me. One can understand a man robbing a bank to obtain the means of bestowing pleasure and luxury upon the woman he loves; but Prosper does not love me; he never has loved me."

"Oh, my dear lady!" protested the gallant and insinuating Fanferlot, "you surely cannot mean what you say."

Her beautiful eyes filled with tears, as she sadly shook her head and replied: "I mean exactly what I say. It is only too true. He is ready to gratify my every wish, you may say; what does that prove? Nothing. I am too well convinced that he does not love me. I know what love is. Once I was beloved by an affectionate, true-hearted man; and my own sufferings of the last year make me know how miserable I must have made him by my cold return. Alas! we must suffer ourselves before we can feel for others. No, I am nothing to Prosper; he would not care if—"

"But then, madame, why—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Nina, "why? You will be very wise if you can answer me. For a year have I vainly sought an answer to this question, so sad to me. I, a woman, cannot answer it; and I defy you to do so. You cannot discover the thoughts of a man who is so thoroughly master of himself that he never permits a single idea that is passing through his mind to be detected upon his countenance. I have watched him as only a woman can watch the man upon whom her fate depends, but it has always been in vain. He is kind and indulgent; but he does not betray himself, never will commit himself. Ignorant people call him weak, yielding: I tell you that fair-haired man is a rod of iron painted like a reed!"

Carried away by the violence of her feelings, Madame Nina betrayed her inmost thoughts. She was without distrust, never suspecting that the stranger listening to her was other than a friend of Prosper. As for Fanferlot, he congratulated himself upon his success. No one but a woman could have drawn him so excellent a portrait; in a moment of excitement she had given him the most valuable information; he now knew the nature of the man with whom he had to deal, which, in an investigation like that he was pursuing, is the principal point. "You know that M. Bertomy gambles," he ventured to say, "and gambling is apt to lead a man—"

Madame Gipsy shrugged her shoulders, and interrupted him. "Yes, he plays," she said, "but he is not a gambler. I have seen him lose and gain large sums without betraying the slightest agitation. He plays as he drinks, as he sups, as he dissipates—without passion, without enthusiasm, without pleasure. Sometimes he frightens me; he seems to drag about a body without a soul. Ah, I am not happy! Never have I been able to overcome his indifference, an indifference so great, so reckless, that I often think it must be despair; nothing will convince me that he has not some terrible secret, some great misfortune weighing upon his mind, and making life a burden."

"Then he has never spoken to you of his past?"

"Why should he tell me? Did you not hear me? I tell you he does not love me!"

Madame Nina was overcome by thoughts of the past, and tears silently coursed down her cheeks. But her despair was only momentary. She started up, and, her eyes sparkling with generous resolution, she exclaimed: "But I love him, and I will save him! I will see his chief, the miserable wretch

who dares to accuse him. I will haunt the judges, and I will prove that he is innocent. Come, sir, let us start, and I promise you that before sunset he shall be free, or I shall be in prison with him."

Madame Gipsy's project was certainly laudable, and prompted by the noblest sentiments; but unfortunately it was impracticable. Moreover, it would be going counter to the plans of the detective. Although he had resolved to reserve to himself all the difficulties as well as the benefits of this inquiry, Fanferlot saw clearly that he could not conceal the existence of Madame Nina from the investigating magistrate. She would necessarily be brought into the case, and be sought after. But he did not wish her to take any steps of her own accord. He proposed to let her appear when and how he judged proper, so that he might gain for himself the merit of having discovered her.

Fanferlot's first step was to endeavour to calm the young woman's excitement. He thought it easy to prove to her that the slightest interference in favour of Prosper would be a piece of folly. "What will you gain by acting thus, my dear madame?" he asked. "Nothing. I can assure you that you have not the least chance of success. Remember that you will seriously compromise yourself. Who knows if you will not be suspected as M. Bertomy's accomplice?"

But this alarming perspective, which had frightened Cavaillon into foolishly giving up a letter which he might so easily have retained, only stimulated Gipsy's enthusiasm. Man calculates, while woman follows the inspirations of her heart. Our most devoted friend, if a man, hesitates and draws back; if a woman, rushes undauntedly forward, regardless of the danger. "What matters the risk?" she exclaimed. "I don't believe any danger exists; but, if it does, so much the better: it will be all the more to my credit. I am sure Prosper is innocent; but, if he should be guilty, I wish to share the punishment which awaits him."

Madame Gipsy's persistence was becoming alarming. She hastily drew around her a cashmere shawl, put on her bonnet, and, although still wearing her dressing-gown and slippers, declared that she was ready to walk from one end of Paris to the other, in search of this or the other magistrate.

"Come, sir," she said, with feverish impatience. "Are you not coming with me?"

Fanferlot was perplexed. Happily he had always several strings to his bow. Personal considerations having no hold upon this impulsive nature, he resolved to appeal to her interest in Prosper.

"I am at your command, my dear lady," he said; "let us go if you desire it; only permit me, while there is yet time, to say that we are very probably about to do great injury to M. Bertomy."

"In what way, if you please?"

"Because we are taking a step that he expressly forbade in his letter; we are surprising him—giving him no warning."

Nina scornfully tossed her head, and replied: "There are some people who must be saved without warning, and against their will. I know Prosper; he is just the man to let himself be murdered without a struggle, without speaking a word—to give himself up through sheer recklessness and despair."

"Excuse me, madame," interrupted the detective: "M. Bertomy has by no means the appearance of a man who has abandoned himself to despair. On the contrary, I think he has already prepared his plan of

defence. By showing yourself, when he advises you to remain in concealment, you will very likely render his most careful precautions useless."

Madame Gipsy was silently weighing the value of Fanferlot's objections. Finally she said: "I cannot remain here inactive, without attempting to contribute in some way to his safety. Can you not understand that this floor burns my feet?"

Evidently, if she was not absolutely convinced, her resolution was shaken. Fanferlot saw that he was gaining ground, and this certainly putting him more at ease, gave weight to his persuasive eloquence. "You have it in your power, madame," he said, "to render a great service to the man you love."

"In what way, sir? tell me in what way."

"Obey him, my child," said Fanferlot, in a paternal tone.

Madame Gipsy evidently expected very different advice. "Obey," she murmured, "obey!"

"It is your duty," said Fanferlot with grave dignity; "it is your sacred duty."

She still hesitated; and he took from the table Prosper's note, which she had laid there, and continued: "What! M. Bertomy at the most trying moment, when he is about to be arrested, stops to point out your line of conduct; and you would render vain this wise precaution! What does he say to you? Let us read over this note, which is like the testament of his liberty. He says, 'If you love me, I entreat you, obey.' And you hesitate to obey. Then you do not love him. Can you not understand, unhappy child, that M. Bertomy has his reasons, terrible, imperious reasons, for your remaining in obscurity for the present?"

Fanferlot understood these reasons the moment he put his foot in the sumptuous apartment of the Rue Chaptal; and, if he did not expose them now, it was because he kept them as a good general keeps his reserve, for the purpose of deciding the victory. Madame Gipsy was intelligent enough to divine these reasons.

"Reasons for my hiding!" thought she. "Prosper wishes, then, to keep everyone in ignorance of our intimacy."

She remained thoughtful for a moment; then a ray of light seemed to cross her mind, and she exclaimed: "Oh, I understand now! Fool that I was for not seeing it before! My presence here, where I have been for a year, would be an overwhelming charge against him. An inventory of my possessions would be taken—of my dresses, my laces, my jewels—and my luxury would be brought against him as a crime. He would be asked where he obtained the money requisite to lavish all these elegancies on me."

The detective bowed, and said: "That is perfectly true, madame."

"Then I must fly at once! Who knows that the police are not already warned, and may appear at any moment?"

"Oh," said Fanferlot with easy assurance, "you have plenty of time; the police are not so very prompt."

"No matter!"

And, leaving the detective alone in the parlour, Madame Nina hastily ran into her bedroom, and calling her maid, her cook, and her little footman, ordered them to empty her drawers and wardrobe of their contents, and assisted them to stuff her best clothing and jewels into her trunks. Suddenly she rushed back to Fanferlot, and said: "Everything will be ready for me to start in a few minutes; but where am I to go?"

"Did not M Bertomy say, my dear lady, to the other end of Paris? To a hotel, or furnished apartments."

"But I don't know where to find any."

Fanferlot seemed to be reflecting; but he had great difficulty in concealing his delight at a sudden idea that flashed upon him; his little black eyes fairly danced with joy. "I know of a hotel," he said at last, "but it might not suit you. It is not elegantly furnished like this apartment."

"Should I be comfortable there?"

"Upon my recommendation you would be treated like a queen, and, above all, you would be kept concealed."

"Where is it?"

"On the other side of the river, on the Quai Saint Michel. It is called the Grand Archangel, and is kept by Madame Alexandre."

Madame Nina was never long making up her mind. "Here are pen and paper," said she, "write your recommendation."

Fanferlot rapidly wrote, and handed her the letter, saying, "With these three lines, madame, you can make Madame Alexandre do anything you wish."

"Very good. Now, how am I to let Cavaillon know my address? It was he who should have brought me Prosper's letter."

"He was unable to come, madame," interrupted the detective; "but I will give him your address."

Madame Gipsy was about to send for a carriage, but Fanferlot said he was in a hurry and would procure her one. He seemed to be in luck that day; for a cab was passing the door, and he hailed it. "Wait here," he said to the driver, after telling him that he was a detective, "for a little brunette who is coming down with some trunks. If she tells you to drive her to the Quai Saint Michel, crack your whip; if she gives you any other address, get down from your box and arrange your harness. I will keep in sight."

He stepped across the street, and stood in the door of a wine-shop. He had not long to wait. In a few minutes the loud cracking of a whip apprised him that Madame Nina had started for the Hôtel of the Grand Archangel. "Aha," said he gaily, "I hold her at any rate."

IV.

At the same hour that Madame Nina Gipsy was seeking refuge at the Grand Archangel, so highly recommended by Fanferlot, Prosper Bertomy was being consigned to the depot of the Préfecture of Police. Ever since the moment when he had resumed his habitual composure, he had not once faltered. Vainly did the people around him watch for a suspicious expression, or any sign of his giving way under the danger of his situation. His face was stolid as marble, and one would have supposed him insensible to the horrors of his condition, had not his heavy breathing, and the beads of perspiration standing on his brow, betrayed the intense agony he was suffering.

At the police station, where Prosper had to wait for two hours while the commissary went to receive orders from higher authorities, he entered into conversation with the two police agents who had charge of him. At twelve o'clock he said he was hungry, and sent to a restaurant near by for his lunch, which he ate with a good appetite, and also drank nearly a bottle of wine. While he was thus occupied, several clerks from the Préfecture,

who have to transact business daily with the commissaries of police, eyed him curiously. They all formed the same opinion, and admiringly said to each other: "Well, he is certainly made of strong stuff, that fellow!" And again: "The young gentleman doesn't seem to care much. He has evidently something in reserve."

When he was told that a cab was waiting for him at the door, he at once rose; but, before going out, requested permission to light a cigar, which was granted him. A flower-girl stood just by the door, and he stopped and bought a bunch of violets of her. The girl, seeing that he was arrested, said, by way of thanks: "Good luck to you, my poor gentleman!"

Prosper appeared touched by this mark of interest, and replied: "Thanks, my good girl, but 'tis a long time since luck has been in my way."

It was magnificent weather, a bright spring morning. As the cab went along the Rue Montmartre, Prosper kept his head out of the window, smilingly complaining at the same time at being imprisoned on such a lovely day, when everything outside was so sunny and pleasant. "It is singular," he said: "I never felt so great a desire to take a walk."

One of the police agents, a large, jovial, red-faced man, received this remark with a hearty burst of laughter, and said: "I understand."

While Prosper was going through the formalities of the commitment, he replied with haughty brevity to the indispensable questions that were put to him. But after being ordered to empty his pockets on the table, they began to search him, his eyes flashed with indignation, and a single tear coursed down his flushed cheek. In an instant he had recovered his stony calmness, and stood up motionless, with his arms raised in the air so that the rough creatures about him could more conveniently ransack him from head to foot, to assure themselves that he had no suspicious object concealed under his clothes.

The search would have, perhaps, been carried to the most ignominious lengths, but for the intervention of a middle-aged man of rather distinguished appearance, who wore a white cravat and gold spectacles, and was sitting at his ease by the fire. He started with surprise, and seemed much agitated, when he saw Prosper brought in by the officers; he stepped forward, as if about to speak to him, then suddenly changed his mind, and sat down again.

In spite of his own troubles, Prosper could not help perceiving that this man kept his eyes fixed upon him. Did he know him? Vainly did he try to recollect having met him before. This individual, treated with all the deference due to a chief, was no less a personage than M. Lecoq, a celebrated member of the detective police. When the men who were searching Prosper were about to take off his boots, under the idea that a knife might be concealed in them, M. Lecoq waved them aside with an air of authority, and said: "You have done enough."

He was obeyed. All the formalities being ended, the unfortunate cashier was taken to a narrow cell; the heavily-barred door was swung to and locked upon him; he breathed freely; at last he was alone. Yes, he believed himself to be alone. He was ignorant that a prison is made of glass, that the prisoner is like a miserable insect under the microscope of an entomologist. He knew not that the walls have listening ears and watchful eyes. He felt so certain of being alone that he at once gave vent to his suppressed feelings, and, dropping his mask of impassibility, burst into a flood of tears. His long-restrained anger now flashed out like a smoulder-

ing fire. In a paroxysm of rage he uttered imprecations and curses. He dashed himself against the prison-walls like a wild beast in a cage.

Prosper Bertomy was not the man he appeared to be. This haughty, correct gentleman had ardent passions and a fiery temperament. One day, when he was about twenty-four years of age, he had become suddenly fired by ambition. While all of his desires were repressed—imprisoned in his low estate, like an athlete in a straight-waistcoat, seeing around him all those rich people with whom money served the purpose of the wand in the fairy-tale, he envied them their lot.

He studied the beginnings of these financial princes, and found that at the starting-point they possessed far less than himself. How, then, had they succeeded? By the force of energy, industry, and assurance. He determined to imitate and excel them.

From that day, with a force of will much less rare than we think, he imposed silence upon his instincts. He reformed not his character, but the outside of his character; and his efforts were not without success. Those who knew him had faith in his character; and his capabilities and ambition inspired the prophecy that he would be successful in attaining eminence and wealth.

And the end of all was this—to be imprisoned for robbery; that is ruined!

For he did not attempt to deceive himself. He knew that, guilty or innocent, a man once suspected is as ineffably branded as the shoulder of a galley-slave. Therefore, what was the use of struggling? What benefit was a triumph which could not wash out the stain?

When the prison attendant brought him his supper, he found him lying on his mattress, with his face buried in the pillow, weeping bitterly. Ah, he was not hungry now! Now that he was alone, he fed upon his own bitter thoughts. He sank from a state of frenzy into one of stupefying despair, and vainly did he endeavour to clear his confused mind, and account for the dark cloud gathering about him; no loop-hole for escape could he discover.

The night was long and terrible, and for the first time he had nothing to count the hours by, as they slowly dragged on, but the measured tread of the patrol who came to relieve the sentinels. He was thoroughly wretched.

At dawn he dropped into a sleep, a heavy, oppressive sleep, which was more wearisome than refreshing; from which he was startled by the rough voice of the jailor.

"Come, sir!" said he, "it is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper jumped up at once, and, without stopping to set right his disordered toilet, said: "I am ready, lead the way."

The jailor remarked as they walked along: "You are very fortunate in having your case brought before a very worthy man." He was right.

Endowed with remarkable penetration, firm, unbiassed, equally free from false pity and excessive severity, M. Patrigent possessed in an eminent degree all the qualities necessary for the delicate and difficult office of investigating magistrate. Perhaps he was wanting in the feverish activity which is sometimes necessary for coming to a quick and just decision; but he possessed unwearying patience, which nothing could discourage. He would cheerfully devote years to the examination of a case; he was even now engaged in an affair of Belgian bank-notes, of which he did not collect all the threads, and solve the mystery, until after four years investigation.

Thus it was always to him that they brought the endless proceedings, the half-finished enquiries, and the incomplete processes.

This was the man before whom Prosper was being conducted, and he was certainly taken by a difficult road. He was escorted along a corridor, through a room full of police agents, down a narrow flight of steps, across a kind of vault, and then up a steep staircase which seemed to have no end. Finally, he reached a long narrow gallery, on which opened numerous doors, bearing different numbers. The custodian of the unhappy cashier stopped before one of these doors, and said: "Here we are, and here your fate will be decided."

At this remark, uttered in a tone of deep commiseration, Prosper could not refrain from shuddering. It was only too true, that on the other side of the door there was a man who would interrogate him, and according to his answers would either release him from custody or commit him for trial. Summoning all his courage, he turned to the door-handle, and was about to enter, when the jailor stopped him. "Don't be in such haste," he said; "you must sit down here and wait till your turn comes; then you will be called." The wretched man obeyed, and his keeper took a seat beside him.

Nothing is more doleful and terrible than the having to wait in this gloomy gallery of the investigating magistrates. Occupying the entire length of the wall is a wooden bench blackened by constant use. This bench has for the last ten years been daily occupied by the murderers, thieves, and suspicious characters of the department of the Seine. Sooner or later, as filth rushes to a sewer, does crime reach this dreadful gallery with one door opening on the galleys, the other on the scaffold. This place was bitterly though vulgarly denominated by a certain magistrate as the great public wash-house of all the foul linen in Paris. When Prosper reached the gallery it was full of people. The bench was almost entirely occupied. Close beside him, so as to touch his shoulder, sat a man with a sinister countenance, dressed in rags.

Before each door, giving access to the offices of the investigating magistrates, stood groups of witnesses conversing in an undertone. Gendarmes were constantly arriving and departing with prisoners. Sometimes, above the noise of their heavy tramping along the flagstones, a woman's stifled sob might be heard, when, looking around, you would see some poor mother or wife with her face buried in her handkerchief, weeping bitterly. At short intervals a door would open and shut, when an officer would call out a name or number.

The stifling atmosphere, and the sight of so much misery made Prosper feel ill and faint; he felt as if another five minutes' stay among these wretched creatures would make him deathly sick, when a little old man dressed in black, wearing a steel chain, the insignia of his office, cried out: "Prosper Bertomy!"

The unhappy man rose, and, without knowing how, found himself in the room of the investigating magistrate. For a moment he was blinded. He had come out of a dark passage; and the room in which he now found himself had a window directly opposite the door, so that a flood of light streamed suddenly upon him. This room, like all the others in the gallery, was of very ordinary appearance, and small and dingy. The wall was covered with a cheap dark green paper, and on the floor was a hideous brown carpet, very much worn. Opposite the door was a large writing-table strewn with bundles of papers, furnishing the antecedents of those persons who were subjected to examinations, and behind was seated the

magistrate, immediately facing those who entered, so that his countenance remained in the shade, while that of the prisoner or witness whom he questioned was in a glare of light.

Before a little table, on the right, sat a clerk, the indispensable auxiliary of the magistrate, engaged in writing.

But Prosper observed none of these details: his whole attention was concentrated upon the arbiter of his fate, and as he closely examined his face he was convinced that the jailor was right in styling him an honourable man. M. Patrigent's homely face, with its irregular outline and short red whiskers, lit up by a pair of bright, intelligent eyes, and a kindly expression, was calculated to impress one favourably at first sight. "Take a seat," he said to Prosper.

This little attention was gratefully welcomed by the prisoner, for he had expected to be treated with harsh contempt. He looked upon it as a good sign, and his mind felt a slight relief. M. Patrigent turned towards the clerk, and said: "We will begin now, Sigault; pay attention."

Looking at Prosper, he then asked him his name.

"Auguste Prosper Bertomy," replied the cashier.

"How old are you?"

"I shall be thirty on the fifth of next May."

"What is your profession?"

"I am—that is, I was—chief cashier in M. André Fauvel's bank."

The magistrate stopped to consult a little memorandum book lying on his desk. Prosper, who followed attentively his every movement, began to be hopeful, saying to himself that never would a man seemingly so unprejudiced be cruel enough to send him to prison again. After finding what he looked for, M. Patrigent resumed the examination. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"At No. 39, Rue Chaptal, for the last four years. Before that time I lived at No. 7, Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Where were you born?"

"At Beaucaire, in the department of Le Gard."

"Are your parents living?"

"My mother died two years ago; my father is still living."

"Does he reside in Paris?"

"No, sir; he lives at Beaucaire with my sister, who married one of the engineers of the Southern canal." It was in broken accents that Prosper answered these last questions. Though there are moments in the life of a man when home memories encourage and console him, there are also moments when he would be thankful to be without a single tie, when he bitterly regrets that he is not alone in the world.

M. Patrigent observed the prisoner's emotion when he spoke of his parents. "What is your father's calling?" he continued.

"He was formerly a superintendent of roads and bridges; then he was employed on the Southern canal like my brother-in-law; now he has retired on a pension."

There was a moment's silence. The magistrate had turned his chair round, so that, although his head was apparently averted, he had a good view of the workings of Prosper's countenance. "Well," he said abruptly, "you are accused of having robbed M. Fauvel of three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

During the last twenty-four hours the wretched young man had had time to familiarize himself with the terrible idea of this accusation; and yet,

uttered as it was now in this formal brief tone, it seemed to strike him with a horror which rendered him incapable of opening his lips. "What have you to answer?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"That I am innocent, sir; I swear that I am innocent!"

"I hope you are," said M. Patrigent, "and you may count upon me to assist you, to the extent of my ability, in proving your innocence. You must have some facts to allege in your defence, some proofs you can furnish me with.

"Ah, sir, what can I say when I am myself unable to understand this dreadful business? I can only refer you to my past life."

The magistrate interrupted him: "Let us be specific; the robbery was committed under circumstances that prevent suspicion from falling upon any one but M. Fauvel and yourself. Do you suspect any one else?"

"No, sir."

"You declare yourself to be innocent, therefore the guilty party must be M. Fauvel." Prosper remained silent. "Have you," persisted the magistrate, "any cause for believing that M. Fauvel robbed himself?" The prisoner preserved a rigid silence.

"I see," said the magistrate, "that you need time for reflection. Listen to the reading of your examination, and after signing it you will return to prison."

The unhappy man was overcome. The last ray of hope was gone. He heard nothing of what Sigault read, and he signed the paper without looking at it. He tottered as he left the magistrate's room, so that the agent who had him in charge was forced to support him. "I fear your case looks bad," said the man, "but don't be disheartened; keep up your courage."

Courage! Prosper had not a spark of it when he returned to his cell; but his heart was filled with anger and resentment. He had determined that he would defend himself before the magistrate, that he would prove his innocence; and he had not had time to do so. He reproached himself bitterly for having trusted to the magistrate's benevolent face. "What a farce," he angrily exclaimed, "to call that an examination!"

It was not really an examination that Prosper had been subjected to, but a mere formality. In summoning him, M. Patrigent obeyed Article 93 of the Criminal Code, which says, "Every suspected person under arrest must be examined within twenty-four hours." But it is not in twenty-four hours, especially in a case like this, with no evidence or material proof, that a magistrate can collect the materials for an examination. To triumph over the obstinate defence of a prisoner who shuts himself up in absolute denial as though in a fortress, valid proofs are needed. These weapons M. Patrigent was busily preparing.

If Prosper had remained a little longer in the gallery, he would have seen the same official who had called him come from the magistrate's room, and cry out, No. 3. The witness who was awaiting his turn, and answered the call for No. 3, was M. Fauvel.

The banker was no longer the same man. Yesterday he was kind and affable in his manner; now, as he entered the magistrate's room, he seemed irritated against his cashier. Reflection, which usually brings calmness and a desire to pardon, had in his case led to anger and a thirst for vengeance. The inevitable questions which commence every examination had scarcely been addressed to him before his impetuous temper gained the mastery, and he burst forth in invectives against Prosper.

M. Patrigent was obliged to impose silence upon the banker, reminding

him of what was due to himself, no matter what wrongs he had suffered at the hands of his clerk. Although he had very slightly examined Prosper, the magistrate was now scrupulously attentive and particular in having every question answered. Prosper's examination had been a mere formality, the verifying of a positive fact. M. Patrigent now occupied himself in ferreting out all the attendant circumstances and the most trifling particulars, in order to group them together, and arrive at a just conclusion.

"Let us proceed with regularity," said the magistrate to M. Fauvel, "and pray confine yourself to answering my questions. Did you ever suspect your cashier of being dishonest?"

"Certainly not. Yet there were reasons which should have made me hesitate to trust him."

"What reasons?"

"M. Bertomy gambled. I have known of his spending whole nights at the card-table, and losing large sums of money. He was intimate with an unprincipled set. Once he was mixed up with one of my customers, M. de Clameran, in a scandalous gambling affair at the house of some disreputable woman, and which ended in an investigation at the police court."

For some minutes the banker continued to revile Prosper. "You must confess, sir," interrupted the magistrate, "that you were very imprudent, if not culpable, to have intrusted the contents of your safe to such a man."

"Ah, sir, Prosper was not always thus. Until the past year he was a perfect model for men of his age. He frequented my house as one of my family; he spent all of his evenings with us, and was the bosom friend of my eldest son Lucien. One day he suddenly left us, and never came to the house again. Yet I had every reason to believe him to be attached to my niece Madeleine."

M. Patrigent had a peculiar manner of contracting his brows when he thought he had discovered some new proof. He now did this, and said: "Might not this admiration for the young lady have been the cause of M. Bertomy's estrangement?"

"How so?" asked the banker with surprise. "I was willing to bestow Madeleine's hand upon him, and to be frank, was astonished that he did not ask for her in marriage. My niece would be a good match for any man, and he should have considered himself fortunate in obtaining her. She is very handsome, and her dowry will be half a million."

"Then you can discover no motive for your cashier's conduct?"

"It is impossible for me to account for it. I have, however, always supposed that Prosper was led astray by a young man whom he met at my house about that time, M. Raoul de Lagors."

"Ah! and who is this young man?"

"A relative of my wife's; a very attractive, intelligent young man, somewhat wild, but rich enough to pay for his follies."

The magistrate wrote the name Lagors at the bottom of an already long list on his memoranda. "Now," he said, "let us come to the point. You are sure that the theft was not committed by any one of your household?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"You always kept your key?"

"I generally carried it about on my person; and whenever I left it at home, I placed it in the drawer of the secretary in my bedroom."

"Where was it on the evening of the robbery?"

"In my secretary."

uttered as it was now in this formal brief tone, it seemed to strike him with a horror which rendered him incapable of opening his lips. "What have you to answer?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"That I am innocent, sir; I swear that I am innocent!"

"I hope you are," said M. Patrigent, "and you may count upon me to assist you, to the extent of my ability, in proving your innocence. You must have some facts to allege in your defence, some proofs you can furnish me with.

"Ah, sir, what can I say when I am myself unable to understand this dreadful business? I can only refer you to my past life."

The magistrate interrupted him: "Let us be specific; the robbery was committed under circumstances that prevent suspicion from falling upon any one but M. Fauvel and yourself. Do you suspect any one else?"

"No, sir."

"You declare yourself to be innocent, therefore the guilty party must be M. Fauvel." Prosper remained silent. "Have you," persisted the magistrate, "any cause for believing that M. Fauvel robbed himself?" The prisoner preserved a rigid silence.

"I see," said the magistrate, "that you need time for reflection. Listen to the reading of your examination, and after signing it you will return to prison."

The unhappy man was overcome. The last ray of hope was gone. He heard nothing of what Sigault read, and he signed the paper without looking at it. He tottered as he left the magistrate's room, so that the agent who had him in charge was forced to support him. "I fear your case looks bad," said the man, "but don't be disheartened; keep up your courage."

Courage! Prosper had not a spark of it when he returned to his cell; but his heart was filled with anger and resentment. He had determined that he would defend himself before the magistrate, that he would prove his innocence; and he had not had time to do so. He reproached himself bitterly for having trusted to the magistrate's benevolent face. "What a farce," he angrily exclaimed, "to call that an examination!"

It was not really an examination that Prosper had been subjected to, but a mere formality. In summoning him, M. Patrigent obeyed Article 93 of the Criminal Code, which says, "Every suspected person under arrest must be examined within twenty-four hours." But it is not in twenty-four hours, especially in a case like this, with no evidence or material proof, that a magistrate can collect the materials for an examination. To triumph over the obstinate defence of a prisoner who shuts himself up in absolute denial as though in a fortress, valid proofs are needed. These weapons M. Patrigent was busily preparing.

If Prosper had remained a little longer in the gallery, he would have seen the same official who had called him come from the magistrate's room, and cry out, No. 3. The witness who was awaiting his turn, and answered the call for No. 3, was M. Fauvel.

The banker was no longer the same man. Yesterday he was kind and affable in his manner; now, as he entered the magistrate's room, he seemed irritated against his cashier. Reflection, which usually brings calmness and a desire to pardon, had in his case led to anger and a thirst for vengeance. The inevitable questions which commence every examination had scarcely been addressed to him before his impetuous temper gained the mastery, and he burst forth in invectives against Prosper.

M. Patrigent was obliged to impose silence upon the banker, reminding

him of what was due to himself, no matter what wrongs he had suffered at the hands of his clerk. Although he had very slightly examined Prosper, the magistrate was now scrupulously attentive and particular in having every question answered. Prosper's examination had been a mere formality, the verifying of a positive fact. M. Patrigent now occupied himself in ferreting out all the attendant circumstances and the most trifling particulars, in order to group them together, and arrive at a just conclusion.

"Let us proceed with regularity," said the magistrate to M. Fauvel, "and pray confine yourself to answering my questions. Did you ever suspect your cashier of being dishonest?"

"Certainly not. Yet there were reasons which should have made me hesitate to trust him."

"What reasons?"

"M. Bertomy gambled. I have known of his spending whole nights at the card-table, and losing large sums of money. He was intimate with an unprincipled set. Once he was mixed up with one of my customers, M. de Clameran, in a scandalous gambling affair at the house of some disreputable woman, and which ended in an investigation at the police court."

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"Where was it on the evening of the robbery?"

"In my secretary."

"But then—"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," said M. Fauvel, "and permit me to tell you that, to a safe like mine, the key is of no importance. To open it, one must know the word upon which the five movable buttons turn. With the word one can even open it without the key; but without the word—"

"And you never told this word to any one?"

"To no one, sir, and sometimes I should have been puzzled to know myself with what word the safe had been closed. Prosper would change it when he chose, and then inform me of the change, but I often forgot it."

"Had you forgotten it on the day of the theft?"

"No; the word had been changed the day before; and its peculiarity struck me."

"What was it?"

"Gipsy—g, i, p, s, y," said the banker, spelling the name.

M. Patrigent wrote down this name. "One more question, sir," said he, "were you at home the evening before the robbery?"

"No; I dined and spent the evening with a friend; when I returned home, about one o'clock, my wife had retired, and I went to bed immediately."

"And you were ignorant of the amount of money in the safe?"

"Absolutely. In conformity with my positive orders, I could only suppose that a small sum had been left there over night; I stated this fact to the commissary in M. Bertomy's presence, and he acknowledged it to be the case."

"It is perfectly correct, sir: the commissary's report proves it." M. Patrigent was for a time silent. To him everything depended upon this one fact, that the banker was unaware of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs being in the safe, and Prosper had disobeyed orders by placing them there over night; hence the conclusion was very easily drawn.

Seeing that his examination was over, the banker thought he would relieve his mind of what was weighing upon it. "I believe myself above suspicion, sir," he began, "and yet I can never rest easy until Bertomy's guilt has been clearly proved. Calumny prefers attacking a successful man, and I may be calumniated: three hundred and fifty thousand francs is a fortune capable of tempting even a rich man. I should be obliged if you would have the condition of my affairs strictly examined. This examination will prove that I could have had no interest in robbing my own safe. The prosperous condition—"

"That is sufficient, sir."

M. Patrigent was already well informed of the high standing of the banker, and knew almost as much of his affairs as M. Fauvel himself. He asked him to sign his testimony, and then escorted him to the door of his office, a rare favour on his part.

When M. Fauvel had left the room, Sigault indulged in a remark. "This seems to be a very cloudy case," he said; "if the cashier is shrewd and firm, it will be difficult to convict him."

"Perhaps it will," said the magistrate; "but let us hear the other witnesses."

The person who answered to the call for No. 4 was Lucien, M. Fauvel's eldest son. He was a tall, handsome young man of twenty-two. To the magistrate's questions he replied that he was very fond of

Prosper, was once very intimate with him, and had always regarded him as a strictly honourable man, incapable of doing anything unbecoming a gentleman. He declared that he could not imagine what fatal circumstances could have induced Prosper to commit a theft. He knew that he played cards, but not to the extent that was reported. He had never known him to indulge in expenses beyond his means. In regard to his cousin Madeleine, he replied: "I always thought that Prosper was in love with Madeleine, and, until yesterday, I was certain he would marry her, knowing that my father would not oppose their union. I have always attributed the discontinuance of Prosper's visits to a quarrel with my cousin, but supposed they would end by becoming reconciled."

This information threw more light upon Prosper's past life, than that furnished by M. Fauvel, but did not apparently reveal any evidence which could be used in the present state of affairs. Lucien signed his deposition, and withdrew.

Cavaillon's turn for examination came next. The poor fellow was in a pitiable state of mind when he appeared before the magistrate. Having confided to a friend his adventure with the detective, as a great secret, and being jeered at for his cowardice in giving up the note, he felt great remorse, and passed the night in reproaching himself for having ruined Prosper. He endeavoured to repair, as well as he could, what he called his treason. He did not exactly accuse M. Fauvel, but he courageously declared that he was the cashier's friend, and that he was as certain of his innocence as he was of his own. Unfortunately, besides having no proofs to strengthen his assertions, the latter were deprived of most of their value by his violent professions of friendship for the accused.

After Cavaillon, six or eight clerks of Fauvel's bank successively defiled in the magistrate's room; but their depositions were nearly all insignificant. One of them, however, stated a fact which the magistrate carefully noted. He said he knew that Prosper had speculated on the Bourse through the medium of M. Raoul de Lagors, and had gained immense sums. Five o'clock struck before the list of witnesses summoned for the day was exhausted. But M. Patrigent's task was not yet finished. He rang for his attendant, who instantly appeared, when he said to him: "Go at once and bring Fanferlot here."

It was some time before the detective answered the summons. Having met a colleague in the gallery, he thought it his duty to treat him; and the official had to fetch him from the wine-shop at the corner.

"How is it that you keep people waiting?" said the magistrate, when the detective entered bowing and scraping. Fanferlot bowed more profoundly still. Despite his smiling face, he was very uneasy. To unravel the Bertomy case alone, it was requisite to play a double game that might be discovered at any moment. In serving at the same time the cause of justice and his own ambition, he ran great risks, the least of which was the losing of his place.

"I have had a great deal to do," he said, to excuse himself, "and have not wasted any time." And he began to give a detailed account of his movements. He was embarrassed, for he spoke with all sorts of restrictions, picking out what was to be said, and avoiding what was to be left unsaid. Thus he gave the history of Cavaillon's letter, which he handed to the magistrate; but he did not breathe a word of Madeleine. On the other hand, he furnished minute biographical details of Prosper and Madame Gipey, which he had collected from various quarters during the day.

As the detective progressed, M. Patrigent's conviction was strengthened. "This young man is evidently guilty," he murmured. Fanferlot did not reply; his opinion was different, but he was delighted that the magistrate was on the wrong track, thinking that his own glorification would thereby be the greater when he discovered the real culprit. True, this grand discovery was as far off as it had ever been.

After hearing all he had to say, the magistrate dismissed Fanferlot, telling him to return the next day. "Above all," he said, as Fanferlot left the room, "do not lose sight of the woman Gipsy; she must know where the money is, and can put us on the right scent."

Fanferlot smiled cunningly. "You may rest easy about that, sir," replied he; "the lady is in good hands."

Left to himself, although the evening was far advanced, M. Patrigent continued to busy himself with the case, and to arrange for the rest of the depositions being taken. The affair had obtained complete possession of his mind; it was, at the same time, puzzling and attractive. It seemed to be surrounded by a cloud of mystery, which he determined to penetrate and dispel.

The next morning he was in his room much earlier than usual. On this day he examined Madame Gipsy, recalled Cavaillon, and sent again for M. Fauvel. For several days he displayed the same activity. Of all the witnesses summoned, only two failed to appear. One was the messenger sent by Prosper to bring the money from the Bank of France, and who was ill from a fall. The other was M. Raoul de Lagors. But their absence did not prevent the memoranda relating to Prosper's case from daily increasing; and on the ensuing Monday, five days after the robbery, M. Patrigent thought he held in his hands enough moral proof to crush the accused.

V.

WHILE his whole past was the object of the most minute investigations, Prosper was in prison, in solitary confinement. The two first days had not appeared very long to him. He had requested, and been supplied with some sheets of paper, numbered, for they had to be accounted for; and he wrote, with a sort of fury, plans of defence and a narrative of justification.

The third day he began to feel uneasy at not seeing any one except the condemned prisoners employed to serve those undergoing solitary confinement, and the jailer who brought him his food. "Am I not to be examined again?" he would ask.

"Your turn is coming," the jailer invariably answered.

Time passed; and the wretched man, tortured by the sufferings of solitary confinement which quickly breaks the spirit, sank into the depths of despair. "Am I to stay here for ever?" he moaned.

No, he was not forgotten; for on the Monday morning, at one o'clock, an hour when the jailer never came, he heard the heavy bolt of his cell pushed back. He ran towards the door. But the sight of a grey-headed man standing there rooted him to the spot. "Father," he gasped, "father!"

"Your father, yes!"

Prosper's astonishment at seeing his father was instantly succeeded by a feeling of great joy. A father is the one friend upon whom we can always rely. In the hour of need, when all else fails, we remember him upon

whose knees we sat when children, and who soothed our sorrows; and even though he may be unable to assist us, his mere presence serves to comfort and strengthen us.

Without reflecting, Prosper, impelled by tender feeling, was about to throw himself into his father's arms, but M. Bertomy harshly repulsed him. "Do not approach me!" he exclaimed. He then advanced into the cell, and closed the door. The father and son were alone together—Prosper heart-broken, crushed; M. Bertomy angry, almost threatening.

Cast off by this last friend, by his father, the miserable young man seemed to be stupefied with pain and disappointment. "You, too!" he bitterly cried. "You—you believe me guilty? O father!"

"Spare yourself this shameful comedy," interrupted M. Bertomy: "I know all."

"But I am innocent, father; I swear it by the sacred memory of my mother."

"Unhappy wretch! cried M. Bertomy, "do not blaspheme!" He seemed overcome by tender thoughts of the past, and in a weak, broken voice, added: "Your mother is dead, Prosper, and little did I think that the day would come when I could thank God for having taken her from me. Your crime would have killed her, would have broken her heart!"

After a painful silence, Prosper said: "You overwhelm me, father, and at the moment when I need all my courage; when I am the victim of an odious plot."

"Victim!" cried M. Bertomy, "victim! Dare you utter your insinuations against the honourable man who has taken care of you, loaded you with benefits, and had insured you a brilliant future! It is enough for you to have robbed him; do not calumniate him."

"For pity's sake, father, let me explain!"

"I suppose you would deny your benefactor's kindness. Yet you were at one time so sure of his affection, that you wrote me to hold myself in readiness to come to Paris and ask M. Fauvel for the hand of his niece. Was that, then, a lie?"

"No," said Prosper in a choked voice, "no."

"That was a year ago; you then loved Mademoiselle Madeleine; at least you told me so."

"Father, I love her now, more than ever; I have never ceased to love her."

M. Bertomy made a gesture of contemptuous pity. "Indeed!" he cried. "And the thought of the pure, innocent girl whom you loved did not prevent your entering upon a path of sin. You loved her! How dared you, then, without blushing, approach her presence after associating with the shameless creatures with whom you were so intimate?"

"For heaven's sake, let me explain by what fatality Madeleine"—

"Enough, sir, enough. I told you that I know everything. I saw M. Fauvel yesterday; this morning I saw the magistrate, and 'tis to his kindness that I am indebted for this interview. Do you know what mortification I suffered before being allowed to see you? I was searched and made to empty all my pockets. They suspected I was conveying some weapon to you!"

Prosper ceased to justify himself, but in a helpless, hopeless way, dropped down upon a seat.

"I have seen your apartments, and at once recognised the proofs of your

crime. I saw silk curtains hanging before all the windows and doors and the walls covered with pictures. In my father's house the walls were whitewashed; and there was but one arm-chair in the whole place, and that was my mother's. Our luxury was our honesty. You are the first member of our family who has possessed Aubusson carpets; though, to be sure, you are the first thief of our blood." At this last insult Prosper's face flushed crimson, but he remained silent and immovable.

"But luxury is necessary now," continued M. Bertomy, becoming more excited and angry as he went on; "luxury must be had at any price. You must have the insolent opulence and display of an upstart, without the upstart's wealth. You must support worthless women who wear satin slippers lined with swan's down, like those I saw in your rooms, and keep servants in livery—and to do this you steal! Bankers will no longer dare trust the keys of their safes with any one, for every day honest families are disgraced by the discovery of some new piece of villainy."

M. Bertomy suddenly stopped. He saw for the first time that his son was not in a condition to hear his reproaches. "But I will say no more," he added. "I came here not to reproach you, but to save, if possible, the honour of our name, to prevent it from being published in the papers among the names of thieves and murderers. Stand up and listen to me!" At his father's imperious tone, Prosper arose. So many successive blows had reduced him to a state of torpor.

"First of all," began M. Bertomy, "how much have you remaining of the stolen three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

"Once more, father," replied the unfortunate man in a tone of hopeless resignation, "once more I swear I am innocent."

"So I supposed you would say. Then our family will have to repair the injury you have done M. Fauvel."

"What do you mean?"

"The day your brother-in-law heard of your crime he brought me your sister's dowry—seventy thousand francs. I succeeded in collecting a hundred and forty thousand francs more. This makes two hundred and ten thousand francs which I have brought with me to give to M. Fauvel."

This threat aroused Prosper from his torpor. "You shall do nothing of the kind!" he cried with unrestrained indignation.

"I will do so before the sun goes down this day. M. Fauvel will grant me time to pay the rest. My pension is fifteen hundred francs. I can live upon five hundred; I am strong enough to go to work again; and your brother-in-law—" M. Bertomy stopped short, frightened at the expression of his son's face. His features were contracted with such furious rage that he was scarcely recognisable, and his eyes glared like a maniac's.

"You dare not disgrace me thus!" cried Prosper; "you have no right to do it. You are free to disbelieve me yourself, but you have no right to take a step which would be a confession of guilt, and ruin me for ever. Who and what convinces you of my guilt? When cold justice hesitates, you, my father, hesitate not, but, more pitiless than the law, condemn me unheard!"

"I will do my duty."

"Which means that I stand on the edge of a precipice, and you push me over! Do you call that your duty? What! between strangers who accuse me, and myself who swear that I am innocent, you do not hesitate? Why? Is it because I am your son? Our honour is at stake, it is true; but that

is only the more reason why you should stand by me, and assist me to defend myself."

Prosper's earnest, truthful manner was enough to unsettle the firmest convictions, and make doubt penetrate the most stubborn mind. "Yet," said M. Bertomy in a hesitating tone, "everything seems to accuse you."

"Ah, father, you do not know that I was suddenly banished from Madeleine's presence; that I was compelled to avoid her. I became desperate, and tried to forget my sorrow in dissipation. I sought oblivion, and found shame and disgust. Oh, Madeleine, Madeleine!" He was overcome with emotion; but in a few minutes he resumed with renewed violence in his voice and manner: "Everything *is* against me; but no matter. I will clear myself or perish in the attempt. Human justice is liable to error; although innocent, I may be convicted; so be it. I will undergo my penalty; but people are not kept galley-slaves for ever."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, father, that I am now another man. My life, henceforth, has an object—vengeance! I am the victim of a vile plot. As long as I have a drop of blood in my veins, I will seek its author. And I will certainly find him; and then bitterly shall he expiate all of my cruel suffering. The blow has come from Fauvel's, and I will seek the villain there."

"Take care: your anger makes you say things that you will repent hereafter."

"Yes, I see, you are going to descant upon the probity of M. André Fauvel. You will tell me that all the virtues have taken refuge in the bosom of this patriarchal family. What do you know about it? Would this be the first instance in which the most shameful secrets are concealed beneath the fairest appearances? Why did Madeleine suddenly forbid me to think of her? Why has she exiled me, when she suffers as much from our separation as I myself, when she still loves me? For she does love me. I am sure of it. I have proofs of it."

The jailer here came to say that the time allotted to M. Bertomy had expired, and that he must leave the cell. A thousand conflicting emotions seemed to rend the old man's heart. Suppose Prosper were telling the truth: how great would be his own remorse, if he had added to the immense weight of sorrow and trouble his son already had to bear! And who could prove that he was not sincere in what he said?

The voice of this son, of whom he had always been so proud, had aroused all his paternal affection which he had so violently repressed. Ah, were he guilty, and guilty of a worse crime, still he was his son, his only son! His countenance lost its severity, and his eyes filled with tears. He wished to leave as he had entered, stern and angry, but he had not the cruel courage. His heart was breaking. He opened his arms, and pressed Prosper to his breast. "Oh, my son!" he murmured, "God grant you have spoken the truth!"

Prosper was triumphant: he had almost convinced his father of his innocence. But he had no time to rejoice over this victory. The cell door again opened, and the jailer's gruff voice called out. "It is time for you to appear before the investigating magistrate."

Prosper instantly obeyed the summons. His step was no longer unsteady, as a few days previous: a complete change had come over him. He walked firmly, with his head erect, and the fire of resolution in his eye. He knew the way now, and he proceeded a little ahead of the officer who escorted him. As he was passing through the room full of police-agents, he encountered

the individual with the gold spectacles, who had watched him so intently the day he was searched. "Courage, M. Prosper Bertomy," he said; "if you are innocent, there are those who will help you."

Prosper started with surprise, and was about to reply, when the man disappeared. "Who is that gentleman?" he asked of the officer who was escorting him.

"Is it possible that you don't know him?" replied the man with surprise. "Why, it is M. Lecoq of the detective service."

"You say his name is Lecoq?"

"You might as well say 'Monsieur Lecoq,'" said the offended official; "it would not burn your mouth. M. Lecoq is a man who knows everything that he wants to know, without its ever being told to him. If your case had been in his hands instead of in those of that smooth-tongued, imbecile Fanferlot, it would have been settled long ago. Nobody is allowed to waste time when he is in command. But he seems to be a friend of yours."

"I never saw him until the first day I came here."

"You can't swear to that, because no one can boast of knowing the real face of M. Lecoq. It is one thing to-day, and another to-morrow; sometimes he is a dark man, sometimes a fair one, sometimes quite young, and then an octogenarian. Why, at times he even deceives me. I begin to talk to a stranger—bah! it turns out to be M. Lecoq! Anybody on the face of the earth might be he. If I were told that you were he, I should say, 'Very likely it is so.' Ah! he can convert himself into any form he pleases. He is a wonderful man!" The speaker would have continued for ever his praises of M. Lecoq, had not the sight of the door of the magistrate's room put an end to them.

This time, Prosper was not kept waiting on the wooden bench; on the contrary, the magistrate was waiting for him. M. Patrigent, who was a profound observer of human nature, had contrived the interview between M. Bertomy and his son. He was certain that between the father, a man of such stubborn honour, and the son, accused of theft, an affecting scene would take place, and this scene would completely unman Prosper, and induce him to confess. He determined to send for him as soon as the interview was over, while his nerves were vibrating with terrible emotions: he would then tell the truth, to relieve his troubled, despairing mind.

The magistrate's surprise therefore was great to see the cashier's bearing; resolute without obstinacy, firm and assured without defiance. "Well," he said to him, "have you reflected?"

"Not being guilty, sir, I had nothing to reflect upon."

"Ah, I see the prison has not been a good counsellor; you forget that sincerity and repentance are the first things necessary to obtain the indulgence of the law."

"I crave no indulgence, sir."

M. Patrigent looked vexed, and said: "What would you say if I told you what had become of the three hundred and fifty thousand francs?"

Prosper shook his head sadly. "If it were known, sir, I should not be here, but at liberty."

This device had often been used by the magistrate, and had generally succeeded; but, with a man so thoroughly master of himself as Prosper then was, there was small chance of success on this occasion. It had been used at a venture, and had failed. "Then you persist in accusing M. Fauvel?" remarked M. Patrigent.

"Him, or some one else."

"Excuse me: no one else, since he alone knew the word. Had he any interest in robbing himself?"

"I can think of none."

"Well, now I will tell you what interest you had in robbing him."

M. Patrigent spoke as a man who was convinced of the facts he was about to state; but his assurance was all assumed. He had relied upon crushing at a blow, a despairing, wretched man, and was nonplussed by seeing him appear so determined upon resistance. "Will you be good enough to tell me," he said in a vexed tone, "how much you have spent during the last year?"

Prosper did not find it necessary to stop to reflect and calculate. "Yes, sir," he answered, unhesitatingly. "Circumstances made it necessary for me to preserve the greatest order in my wild career; I spent about fifty thousand francs."

"Where did you obtain them?"

"In the first place, twelve thousand francs were left to me by my mother. I received from M. Fauvel fourteen thousand francs for my salary, and share of the profits. By speculating on the Bourse I gained eight thousand francs. The rest I borrowed, and intend repaying out of the fifteen thousand francs which I have deposited in M. Fauvel's bank." The account was clear, exact, and could be easily proved; it must be a true one.

"Who lent you the money?" inquired M. Patrigent.

"M. Raoul de Lagors." This witness had left Paris the day of the robbery, and could not be found; so for the time being, M. Patrigent was compelled to rely upon Prosper's word.

"Well," he said, "I will not press this point. Tell me why, in spite of M. Fauvel's formal order, you drew the money from the Bank of France the night before, instead of waiting till the morning of the payment?"

"Because M. de Clameran had informed me that it would be convenient, necessary even, for him to have his money early in the morning. He will testify to that fact, if you summon him; and I knew that I should reach my office late."

"Then M. de Clameran is a friend of yours?"

"By no means. I have always felt an aversion to him, which there was nothing whatever to justify; he is, however, the intimate friend of M. de Lagors."

While Sigault was writing down these answers, M. Patrigent was racking his brain to imagine what could have occurred between M. Bertomy and his son, to cause this transformation in Prosper. "One thing more," said the magistrate: "how did you spend your evening the night of the crime?"

"When I left my office, at five o'clock, I took the St. Germain train, and went to Vésinet to M. de Lagors's country house, to return him fifteen hundred francs which he had asked for; and, not finding him at home, I left the money with his servant."

"Did the latter tell you that M. de Lagors was going away?"

"No, sir. I did not know that he had left Paris."

"Where did you go when you left Vésinet?"

"I returned to Paris, and dined at a restaurant with a friend."

"And then?" Prosper hesitated.

"You are silent," said M. Patrigent. "I will therefore tell you how you

employed your time. You returned to your rooms in the Rue Chaptal, dressed yourself, and went to a party given by one of those women who style themselves dramatic artistes, and who are a disgrace to the stage; who receive salaries of a hundred crowns a year, and yet keep their carriages. You went to Mademoiselle Wilson's."

"You are right, sir."

"There is heavy playing at Wilson's?"

"Sometimes."

"You are in the habit of visiting places of this sort. Were you not connected in some way with a scandalous affair which took place at the house of a woman named Crescenzi?"

"I was summoned to give evidence, having been witness of a theft."

"Gambling generally leads to stealing. And did you not play baccarat at Wilson's, and lose eighteen hundred francs?"

"Excuse me, sir, only eleven hundred."

"Very well. In the morning you paid a bill that fell due of a thousand francs."

"Yes, sir."

"Moreover, there remained in your desk five hundred francs, and you had four hundred in your purse when you were arrested. So that altogether, in twenty-four hours, four thousand five hundred francs—"

Prosper was not discountenanced, but amazed. Not being aware of the powerful means of investigation which the law has at its command, he wondered how the magistrate could have obtained such accurate information in so short a time. "Your statement is correct, sir," he finally said.

"Where did all this money come from? The evening before you had so little that you were obliged to defer the payment of a small account."

"The day to which you allude, I sold some bonds I had, through an agent, which realized about three thousand francs. In addition I took from the safe two thousand francs in advance of my salary. I have nothing to conceal."

Prosper had given clear answers to all the questions put to him, and M. Patrigent thought he would now attack him from a new point. "You say you have no wish to conceal any of your actions; then why this note stealthily thrown to one of your companions?" Here he held up the mysterious note.

This time the blow struck. Prosper's eyes dropped before the inquiring look of the magistrate. "I thought," he stammered, "I wished"—

"You wished to hide your mistress?"

"Well, yes, sir, I did. I knew that a man in my condition, accused of a robbery, has every fault, every weakness he has ever indulged in, charged against him as a great crime."

"Which means that you knew that the presence of a woman at your apartments would tell very much against you, and that justice would not excuse this scandalous defiance of public morality. A man who respects himself so little as to live with a worthless woman, does not elevate her to his standard, but descends to her base level."

"Sir!"

"I suppose you know who the woman is, whom you permit to bear the honest name borne by your mother?"

"Madame Gipsy was a governess when I first knew her. She was born at Oporto, and came to France with a Portuguese family."

"Her name is not Gipsy: she has never been a governess, and she is not a Portuguese."

Prosper began to protest against this statement; but M. Patrigent

shrugged his shoulders, and after looking over a lot of papers on his desk, said: "Ah, here it is; listen: Palmyre Chocareille, born at Paris in 1840, daughter of James Chocareille, undertaker's assistant, and of Caroline Piedlent, his wife."

Prosper looked vexed and impatient; he was not aware that the magistrate was reading him this report in order to convince him that nothing can escape the police. "Palmyre Chocareille," continued M. Patrigent, "was apprenticed at twelve years of age to a shoemaker, and remained with him until she was sixteen. Traces of her for one year are lost. At the age of seventeen she was hired as a servant by a grocer in the Rue St. Denis, named Dombas, and remained with him three months. She entered during this same year, 1857, eight different situations. In 1858 she entered the service of a dealer in fans in the Passage Choiseul."

As he read, the magistrate watched Prosper's face to observe the effect of these revelations. "Towards the close of 1858," continued he, "she was employed as a servant by Madame Nunès, and accompanied her to Lisbon. How long she remained in Lisbon, and what she did while she remained there, is not reported. But in 1861 she returned to Paris, and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment for assault and battery. Ah, she returned from Portugal with the name of Nina Gipsy."

"But, I assure you, sir," Prosper began.

"Yes, I understand: this history is less romantic, doubtless, than the one related to you; but then it has the merit of being true. We lose sight of Palmyre Chocareille, called Gipsy, upon her release from prison; but but we meet her again six months later, she having made the acquaintance of a commercial traveller named Caldas, who became infatuated with her beauty, and furnished some rooms for her near the Bastille. She assumed his name for some time, then she deserted him to devote herself to you. Did you ever hear of this Caldas?"

"Never, sir."

"This foolish man so deeply loved this creature that her desertion drove him almost insane through grief. He was very resolute, and publicly swore that he would kill his rival if he ever found him. The current report afterwards was, that he committed suicide. He certainly sold the furniture of the house occupied by the woman Chocareille, and suddenly disappeared. All the efforts made to discover him proved fruitless."

The magistrate paused a moment as if to give Prosper time for reflection, and then slowly said: "And this is the woman whom you made your companion, the woman for whom you robbed the bank!"

Once more M. Patrigent was on the wrong tract, owing to Fanferlot's incomplete information. He had hoped that Prosper would betray himself by uttering some passionate retort when thus wounded to the quick; but the latter remained impassible. Of all that the magistrate had said to him his mind dwelt upon only one word—"Caldas," the name of the poor commercial traveller who had killed himself.

"At any rate," insisted M. Patrigent, "you will confess that this girl has caused your ruin."

"I cannot confess that, sir, for it is not true."

"Yet she is the cause of your extravagance. Listen,"—the magistrate here drew a bill from the file of papers—"During December you paid her dressmaker, Van Klopen, for two out-door costumes, nine hundred francs; one evening dress, seven hundred francs; one domino, trimmed with lace, four hundred francs."

"I spent that money of my own free will ; but, nevertheless, I was not in the least attached to her."

M. Patrigent shrugged his shoulders. "You cannot deny the evidence," said he. "I suppose you will also say that it was not for this girl's sake you ceased spending your evenings at M. Fauvel's?"

"I assure you that she was not the cause of my ceasing to visit M. Fauvel's family."

"Then why did you suddenly break off your attentions to a young lady whom you confidently expected to marry, and whose hand you had written to your father to ask for you?"

"I had reasons which I cannot reveal," answered Prosper with emotion.

The magistrate breathed freely ; at last he had discovered a vulnerable point in the prisoner's armour. "Did Mademoiselle Madeleine banish you from her presence?" Prosper was silent, and seemed agitated. "Speak," said M. Patrigent ; "I must tell you that this is one of the most important circumstances in your case."

"Whatever the cost may be, on this subject I am compelled to keep silence."

"Beware of what you do ; justice will not be satisfied with scruples of conscience." M. Patrigent waited for an answer. None came.

"You persist in your obstinacy, do you?" continued he. "Well, we will go on to the next question. You have, during the last year, spent fifty thousand francs. Your resources are at an end, and your credit is exhausted ; to continue your mode of life was impossible. What did you intend to do?"

"I had no settled plan. I thought it might last as long as it would, and then I—"

"And then you would abstract money from the safe ; was it not so?"

"Ah, sir, if I were guilty I should not be here ! I should never have been such a fool as to return to the bank ; I should have fled."

M. Patrigent could not restrain a smile of satisfaction, and exclaimed : "Exactly the argument I expected you to use. You showed your shrewdness precisely by staying to face the storm, instead of flying the country. Several recent cases have taught dishonest cashiers that flight abroad is dangerous. Railways travel fast, but telegrams travel faster. A French thief can be arrested in London within forty-eight hours after his description has been telegraphed. Even America is no longer a refuge. You remained, prudently and wisely, saying to yourself, 'I will manage to avoid suspicion ; and, even if I am found out, I shall be free again after three or five years' seclusion, with a large fortune to enjoy.' Many people would sacrifice five years of their lives for three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"But, sir, had I calculated in the manner you describe, I should not have been content with three hundred and fifty thousand francs—I should have waited for an opportunity to steal a million. I often had that sum in my charge."

"Oh ! it is not always convenient to wait."

Prosper was buried in deep thought for some minutes. "Sir," he finally said, "there is one detail I forgot to mention before, and it may be of importance."

"Explain, if you please."

"The messenger whom I sent to the Bank of France for the money must have seen me tie up the bundles of notes and put them away in the safe. At any rate, he knows that I left my office before he did."

"Very well; the man shall be examined. Now you can return to your cell; and once more I advise you to consider the consequences of your persistent denial." M. Patrigent thus abruptly dismissed Prosper because he wished to act immediately upon this last piece of information.

"Sigault," said he, as soon as Prosper had left the room, "is not this messenger the man who was excused from being examined from his having sent a doctor's certificate declaring him too ill to appear?"

"It is, sir."

"Where does he live?"

"Fanferlot says he was so ill that he was taken to the hospital—the Dubois Hospital."

"Very good. I am going to examine him to-day, this very hour. Take your pen and paper, and send for a cab."

It was some distance from the Palais de Justice to the Dubois Hospital; but the cabman, urged by the promise of a handsome present for himself, made his sorry jades fly as if they were blood horses.

Would the messenger be able to answer any questions? That was the point. The physician in charge of the hospital said that, although the man suffered severely from a broken knee, his mind was perfectly clear. "That being the case," said the magistrate, "I wish to examine him, and desire that no one be admitted while he makes his deposition."

"Oh! you will not be intruded upon; his room contains four beds, but with the exception of his own they are just now all unoccupied."

When the messenger saw the magistrate enter, followed by a tall thin young man with a portfolio under his arm, he at once knew what they had come for. "Ah," he said, "you have come to see me about M. Bertomy's affair?"

"Precisely."

M. Patrigent remained standing by the sick-bed while Sigault arranged his papers on a little table. In answer to the usual questions, the messenger stated that he was named Antonin Poche, was forty years old, born at Cadaujac in the Gironde, and was unmarried.

"Now," said the magistrate, "are you well enough to answer clearly any questions I may put to you?"

"Yes, certainly, sir."

"Did you, on the 27th of February, go to the Bank of France for the three hundred and fifty thousand francs that were stolen?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what hour did you return with the money?"

"It must have been five o'clock when I got back."

"Do you remember what M. Bertomy did when you handed him the notes? Now, do not be in a hurry; think before you answer the question."

"Let me see: first he counted the notes, and made them up into four packages; then he put them in the safe, which he afterwards locked, and then—it seems to me—yes, I am not mistaken, he went out!"

He uttered these last words with so much energy, that, forgetting his knee he half started up in bed, giving vent at the same time to a cry of pain.

"Are you sure of what you say?" asked the magistrate.

M. Patrigent's solemn tone seemed to frighten Antonin. "Sure?" he exclaimed with marked hesitation; "I would bet my head on it, yet I am not more sure than that!"

It was impossible to get him to be more precise in his answers. He had been frightened. He already imagined himself compromised, and for a trifle

would have retracted everything. But the effect was none the less produced, and when they retired M. Patrigent said to Sigault: "This is a very important piece of evidence."

VI.

THE hotel of the Grand Archangel, Madame Gipsy's asylum, was the most elegant one on the Quai St. Michel. At this hotel a person who pays her fortnight's board in advance is treated with marked consideration.

Madame Alexandre, who had been a handsome woman, was now stout, laced till she could scarcely breathe, always over-dressed, and fond of wearing a number of flashy gold chains around her fat neck. She had bright eyes and white teeth; but, alas, a red nose. Of all her weaknesses—and heaven knows she had indulged in every variety—only one remained; she loved a good dinner, washed down with plenty of good wine. But, yet, loved her husband; and, about the time M. Patrigent was leaving the hospital, she began to feel worried because her "little man" had not returned to dinner. She was about to sit down without him, when the waiter cried out: "Here is master." And Fanferlot appeared in person.

Three years before, Fanferlot had kept a little private inquiry office; Madame Alexandre dealt without a license in perfumery and toilet articles, and, finding it necessary to have some of her doubtful customers watched, engaged Fanferlot's services; this was the origin of their acquaintance.

If they went through the marriage ceremony for the good of the mayoralty and the church, it was because they imagined it would, like a baptism, wash out the sins of the past. Upon this momentous day, Fanferlot gave up his private inquiry office, and entered the police, where he had already been occasionally employed, and Madame Alexandre retired from business.

Uniting their savings, they hired and furnished the Grand Archangel, which they were now carrying on prosperously, esteemed by their neighbours, who were ignorant of Fanferlot's connection with the police force.

"Why, how late you are, my little man!" exclaimed Madame Alexandre as she dropped her knife and fork, and rushed forward to embrace her husband.

Fanferlot received her caresses with an air of abstraction. "My back is broken," he said. "I have been the whole day playing billiards with Evariste, M. Fauvel's valet, and allowed him to win as often as he wished—a man who does not know what pool is! I became acquainted with him yesterday, and now I am his best friend. If I wish to enter M. Fauvel's service in Antonin's place, I can rely upon Evariste's good word."

"What, you be an office messenger? you?"

"Of course I would. How else am I to get an opportunity of studying my characters, if I am not on the spot to continually watch them?"

"Then the valet gave you no information?"

"None that I could make use of, and yet I turned him inside out like a glove. This banker is a remarkable man; you don't often meet with one of his sort nowadays. Evariste says he has not a single vice, not even a little defect by which his valet could gain ten sous. He neither smokes, drinks, nor plays; in fact, he is a saint. He is worth millions, and lives as respectably and quietly as a grocer. He is devoted to his wife, adores his children, is very hospitable, but seldom goes into society."

"Then his wife is young?"

"No, she must be about fifty."

Madame Alexandre reflected a minute, then asked: "Did you inquire about the other members of the family?"

"Certainly. The younger son is in the army. The elder son, Lucien, lives with his parents, and is altogether as proper as a young lady. He is so good, indeed, that he is perfectly stupid."

"And what about the niece?"

"Evariste could tell me nothing about her."

Madame Alexandre shrugged her fat shoulders. "If you have discovered nothing," said she, "it is because there is nothing to be discovered. Still, do you know what I would do, if I were you?"

"Tell me."

"I would consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot jumped up as if he had been shot. "Now, that's pretty advice!" he exclaimed. "Do you want me to lose my place? M. Lecoq does not suspect that I have anything to do with the case, excepting to obey his orders."

"Nobody told you to let him know you were investigating it on your own account. You can consult him with an air of indifference, as if you were not at all interested; and, after you have got his opinion, you can take advantage of it."

The detective weighed his wife's words, and then said: "Perhaps you are right; yet M. Lecoq is so deucedly shrewd, that he might see through me."

"Shrewd!" echoed Madame Alexandre; "shrewd! All of you at the Préfecture say that so often, that he has gained his reputation by it. You are just as sharp as he is."

"Well, we will see. I will think the matter over; but, in the meantime, what does the girl say?" The "girl" was Madame Nina Gipsy.

In taking up her abode at the Grand Archangel, Madame Nina thought she was following good advice; and, as Fanferlot had never appeared in her presence since, she was still under the impression that she had obeyed a friend of Prosper's. When she received her summons from M. Patrigent, she admired the wonderful skill of the police in discovering her hiding place; for she had established herself at the hotel under a false, or rather her true name, Palmyre Chocareille. Artfully questioned by her inquisitive landlady, she had, without any mistrust, confided her history to her. Thus Fanferlot was able to impress the magistrate with the idea of his being a skilful detective, when he pretended to have discovered all this information from a variety of sources.

"She is still upstairs," replied Madame Alexandre. "She suspects nothing; but to keep her in the house becomes daily more difficult. I don't know what the magistrate told her, but she came home quite beside herself with anger. She wanted to go and make a fuss at M. Fauvel's. Then she wrote a letter, which she told Jean to post for her; but I kept it to show you."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "you have a letter, and did not tell me before? Perhaps it contains the clue to the mystery. Give it to me, quick."

Obedying her husband, Madame Alexandre opened a little cupboard and took out a letter, which she handed to him. "Here, take it," she said, "and be satisfied."

Considering that she used to be a chambermaid, Palmyre Chocareille,

since become Madame Gipsy, wrote well. Her letter bore the following address, written in a free, flowing hand :

"M. L. DE CLAMERAN,
"Forge-Master, Hôtel du Louvre.

"To be handed to M. Raoul de Lagors.

"(Immediate.)"

"Oh, ho!" said Fanferlot, accompanying his exclamation with a little whistle, as was his habit when he thought he had made a grand discovery.

"Oh, ho!"

"Are you going to open it?" inquired Madame Alexandre.

"A little bit," said Fanferlot, as he dexterously opened the envelope.

Madame Alexandre leaned over her husband's shoulder, and they both read the following :

"MONSIEUR RAOUL—Prosper is in prison, accused of a robbery which he never committed. I wrote to you three days ago."

"What!" interrupted Fanferlot, "this silly girl wrote, and I never saw the letter?"

"But, little man, she must have posted it herself, the day she went to the Palais de Justice."

"Very likely," said Fanferlot, propitiated. He continued reading :

"I wrote to you three days ago, and have no reply. Who will help Prosper if his best friends desert him? If you don't answer this letter, I shall consider myself released from a certain promise, and without scruple will tell Prosper of the conversation I overheard between you and M. de Clameran. But I can count on you, can I not? I shall expect you at the Grand Archangel, on the quai St. Michel, the day after to-morrow, between twelve and four.—NINA GIPSY."

The letter read, Fanferlot at once proceeded to copy it.

"Well!" said Madame Alexandre, "what do you think?"

Fanferlot was delicately refastening the letter when the door of the hotel office was abruptly opened, and the waiter twice whispered: "Pst! Pst!"

Fanferlot rapidly disappeared into a dark closet. He had barely time to close the door before Madame Gipsy entered the room. The poor girl was sadly changed. She was pale and hollow-cheeked, and her eyes were red with weeping.

On seeing her, Madame Alexandre could not conceal her surprise. "Why, my child, you are not going out?" said she.

"I am obliged to do so, madame; and I have come to ask you to tell any one that may call during my absence to wait until I return."

"But where in the world are you going at this hour, unwell as you are?"

For a moment Madame Gipsy hesitated. "Oh," she said, "you are so kind that I am tempted to confide in you; read this note which a messenger just now brought to me."

"What!" cried Madame Alexandre perfectly aghast; "a messenger enter my house, and go up to your room!"

"Is there anything surprising in that?"

"No, oh, no! nothing surprising." And in a tone loud enough to be heard in the closet, Madame Alexandre read the note :

"A friend of Prosper who can neither receive you, nor present himself at your hotel, is very anxious to speak to you. Be in the omnibus office opposite the tower of Saint Jacques, to-night at nine precisely, and the writer will be there, and tell you what he has to say.

"I have appointed this public place for the rendezvous so as to relieve your mind of all fear."

"And you are going to this rendezvous?"

"Certainly, madame."

"But it is imprudent, foolish: it is a snare to entrap you."

"It makes no difference," interrupted Nina. "I am so unfortunate already that I have nothing more to dread. Any change would be a relief." And, without waiting to listen to anything more, she went out. The door had scarcely closed upon her before Fanferlot bounced out of the closet.

The mild detective was white with rage, and swore violently. "What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Am I to stand by and have people walking all over the Grand Archangel as if it were a public street?" Madame Alexandre stood trembling, and dared not speak. "Was ever such impudence heard of before!" he continued. "A messenger comes into my house, and goes up stairs without being seen by anybody! I will look into this. And the idea of you, Madame Alexandre, you, a sensible woman, being idiotic enough to try and persuade that little viper not to keep the appointment!"

"But, my dear—"

"Had you not sense enough to know that I would follow her, and discover what she is attempting to conceal? Come, make haste and help me, so that she won't recognise me."

In a few minutes Fanferlot was completely disguised by a thick beard, a wig, and a linen blouse, and looked for all the world like one of those disreputable working men who go about seeking for employment, and, at the same time, hoping they may not find any.

"Have you your life preserver?" asked the solicitous Madame Alexandre.

"Yes, yes; make haste and have that letter to M. de Clameran posted, and keep on the look out." And without listening to his wife, who called after him: "Good luck," Fanferlot darted into the street.

Madame Gipsy had ten minutes start of him; but he ran up the street he knew she must have taken, and overtook her on the Pout-au-Change. She was walking with the uncertain manner of a person who, impatient to be at a rendezvous, has started too soon, and is obliged to occupy the intervening time. First she would walk slowly, then quicken her steps, and proceed very rapidly. She strolled up and down the Place du Châtelet several times, read the theatre-bills, and finally seated herself on a bench. One minute before a quarter to nine, she entered the omnibus-office, and sat down.

A moment afterwards Fanferlot entered; but, as he feared that Madame Gipsy might recognise him in spite of his big beard, he took a seat at the opposite end of the room, in a dark corner. "Singular place for a conversation," he thought, as he watched the young woman. "Who in the world can have made this appointment in an omnibus office? Judging from her evident curiosity and uneasiness, I could swear she has not the faintest idea for whom she is waiting."

Meanwhile, the office was rapidly filling with people. Every minute an official would shout out the destination of an omnibus which had just arrived, and the passengers would rush in to obtain tickets, hoping to be able to proceed by it.

As each new-comer entered, Nina would tremble, and Fanferlot would say, "This must be him!" Finally, as the Hotel-de-Ville clock was striking nine, a man entered, and, without going to the ticket-desk, walked

directly up to Nina, bowed, and took a seat beside her. He was of medium-size, rather stout, with a crimson face, and fiery-red whiskers. His dress was that of a well-to-do merchant, and there was nothing in his manner or appearance to excite attention.

Fanferlot watched him eagerly. "Well, my friend," he said to himself, "in future I shall recognise you, no matter where we meet; and this very evening I will find out who you are." Despite his intent listening, Fanferlot could not hear a word spoken by either the stranger or Nina. All he could do was to judge what the subject of their conversation might be by their gestures.

When the stout man bowed and spoke to her, Madame Gipsy looked so surprised that it was evident she had never seen him before. When he sat down by her, and said a few words, she started up with a frightened air, as if seeking to escape. A single word and look made her resume her seat. Then, as the stout man went on talking, Nina's attitude betrayed a certain apprehension. She evidently refused to do something required of her; then suddenly she seemed to consent, when a good reason was given for her doing so. At one moment she appeared ready to weep, and the next her pretty face was illumined by a bright smile. Finally, she shook hands with her companion, as if she were confirming a promise.

"What can all this mean?" said Fanferlot to himself, as he sat in his dark corner, biting his nails. "What an idiot I am to have stationed myself so far off!" He was thinking how he could manage to approach nearer without arousing their suspicions, when the stout man rose, offered his arm to Madame Gipsy, who accepted it without hesitation, and they walked together towards the door.

They were so engrossed with each other, that Fanferlot thought he could, without risk, follow them closely; and it was well he did, for the crowd was dense outside, and he would soon have lost sight of them. Reaching the door, he saw the stout man and Nina cross the pavement, hail a cab, and enter it.

"Very good," muttered Fanferlot, "I've got them now. There is no need to hurry."

While the driver was gathering up his reins, Fanferlot prepared himself; and, when the cab started, he set off at a brisk trot, determined upon following it to the end of the earth.

The cab proceeded along the Boulevard Sébastopol. It went pretty fast; but it was not for nothing that Fanferlot had been dubbed the Squirrel. With his elbows glued to his sides, and economising his wind, he ran on. By the time he had reached the Boulevard St. Denis, he began to get winded, and stiff from a pain in his side. The cabman abruptly turned into the Rue Faubourg St. Martin.

But Fanferlot, who, at eight years of age, had played about the streets of Paris, was not to be baffled; he was a man of resources. He seized hold of the springs of the cab, raised himself up by the strength of his wrists, and hung on, with his legs resting on the axle-tree of the hind wheels. He was not particularly comfortable, but then, he no longer ran the risk of being distanced. "Now," he chuckled, behind his false beard, "you may drive as fast as you please, cabby."

The man whipped up his horses, and drove furiously along the hilly street of the Faubourg St. Martin. Finally the cab stopped in front of a wine-shop, and the driver jumped down from his seat, and went in.

The detective also left his uncomfortable post, and crouching in a door-

way, waited for Nina and her companion to alight, with the intention of following closely upon their heels. Five minutes passed, and still there were no signs of them. "What can they be doing all this time?" grumbled the detective. With great precautions he approached the cab, and peeped in. Oh, cruel deception! it was empty!

Fanferlot felt as if some one had thrown a bucket of ice-water over him; he remained rooted to the spot with his mouth open, the picture of blank bewilderment. He soon recovered his wits sufficiently to burst forth into a volley of oaths, loud enough to rattle all the window-panes in the neighbourhood. "Tricked!" he cried, "fooled! Ah! but won't I make them pay for this!"

In a moment his quick mind had run over the gamut of possibilities, probable and improbable. "Evidently," he muttered, "this fellow and Nina entered by one door, and got out by the other; the trick is simple enough. If they resorted to it, 'tis because they feared being followed. If they feared being followed, they have uneasy consciences; therefore—" He suddenly interrupted his monologue as the idea struck him that he had better endeavour to find out something from the driver.

Unfortunately, the driver was in a very surly mood, and not only refused to answer, but shook his whip in so threatening a manner that Fanferlot deemed it prudent to beat a retreat. "Oh, hang it," he muttered, "perhaps the driver is mixed up in the affair also!"

But what could he do now at this time of night? He could not imagine. He walked dejectedly back to the quay, and it was half-past eleven when he reached his own door. "Has the little fool returned?" he inquired of Madame Alexandre, the instant she let him in.

"No; but here are two large bundles which have come for her."

Fanferlot hastily opened them. They contained three cotton dresses, some heavy shoes, and some linen caps. "Well," said the detective in a vexed tone, "now she is going to disguise herself. Upon my word, I am getting puzzled! What can she be up to?"

When Fanferlot was sulkily walking down the Faubourg St. Martin, he had fully made up his mind that he would not tell his wife of his discomfiture. But once at home, confronted with a new fact of a nature to negative all his conjectures, his vanity disappeared. He confessed everything—his hopes so nearly realized, his strange mischance, and his suspicions. They talked the matter over, and finally decided that they would not go to bed until Madame Gipsy, from whom Madame Alexandre was determined to obtain an explanation of what had happened, returned. At one o'clock the worthy couple were about giving over all hope of her re-appearance, when they heard the bell ring.

Fanferlot instantly slipped into the closet, and Madame Alexandre remained in the office to receive Nina. "Here you are at last, my dear child!" she cried. "Oh, I have been so uneasy, so afraid lest some misfortune had happened!"

"Thanks for your kind interest, madame. Has a bundle been sent here for me?"

Poor Nina's appearance had strikingly changed; she was still sad, but no longer dejected as she had been. To her prostration of the last few days, had succeeded a firm and generous resolution, which was betrayed in her sparkling eyes and resolute step.

"Yes, two bundles came for you; here they are. I suppose you saw M. Bertomy's friend?"

"Yes, madame; and his advice has so changed my plans, that, I regret to say, I must leave you to-morrow."

"Going away to-morrow! then something must have happened."

"Oh! nothing that would interest you, madame."

After lighting her candle at the gas-burner, Madame Gipsy said: "Good night" in a very significant way, and left the room.

"And what do you think of that, Madame Alexandre?" asked Fanferlot, as he emerged from his hiding-place.

"It is incredible! This girl writes to M. de Lagors to meet her here, and then does not wait for him."

"She evidently mistrusts us; she knows who I am."

"Then this friend of the cashier must have told her."

"Nobody knows who told her. I begin to think that I have to do with some very knowing thieves. They guess I am on their track, and are trying to escape me. I should not be at all surprised if this little rogue has the money herself, and intends to run off with it to-morrow."

"That is not my opinion; but listen to me, you had better take my advice, and consult M. Lecoq."

Fanferlot meditated a while, then exclaimed: "Very well; I will see him, just for your satisfaction; because I know that if I have not discovered anything, neither will he. But if he takes upon himself to be domineering, it won't do; for only let him show his insolence to me, and I will let him know his place!"

Notwithstanding this brave speech, the detective passed an uneasy night, and at six o'clock the next morning he was up—it was necessary to rise very early if one wished to catch M. Lecoq at home—and refreshed by a cup of strong coffee, he directed his steps towards the dwelling of the celebrated detective.

Fanferlot the Squirrel was certainly not afraid of his chief, as he called him, for he started off with his nose in the air, and his hat cocked on one side. But by the time he reached the Rue Montmartre, where M. Lecoq lived, his courage had vanished; he pulled his hat over his eyes, and hung his head, as if looking for relief among the paving-stones. He slowly ascended the stairs, pausing several times, and looking around as if he would like to fly. Finally he reached the third floor, and stood before a door decorated with the arms of the famous detective—a cock, the symbol of vigilance—and his heart failed him so that he had scarcely the courage to ring the bell.

The door was opened by Janouille, M. Lecoq's old servant, who had very much the manner and appearance of a grenadier. She was as faithful to her master as a watch-dog, and always stood ready to attack any one who did not treat him with the august respect which she considered his due. "Well, M. Fanferlot," she said, "you come at a right time for once in your life. The chief is waiting to see you."

Upon this announcement, Fanferlot was seized with a violent desire to retreat. By what chance could Lecoq be waiting for him? While he thus hesitated, Janouille seized him by the arm, and pulled him in, saying: "Do you want to take root there? Come along, the master is busy at work in his study."

Seated at a desk in the middle of a large room, half library and half theatrical dressing room, furnished in a curious style, was the same individual with gold spectacles, who had said to Prosper at the Préfecture, "Have courage." This was M. Lecoq in his official character.

Fanferlot on his entrance advanced respectfully, bowing till his back-bone was a perfect curve. M. Lecoq laid down his pen, and looking sharply at him, said: "Ah, so here you are, young man. Well, it seems that you haven't made much progress in Bertomy's case."

"What," murmured Fanferlot, "you know—" "I know that you have muddled everything until you can't see your way out; so that you are ready to give in."

"But, M. Lecoq, it was not I—"

M. Lecoq rose, and walked up and down the room; suddenly he confronted Fanferlot, and said in a tone of scornful irony: "What would you think, Master Squirrel, of a man who abuses the confidence of those who employ him, who reveals just enough to lead the prosecution on the wrong scent, who sacrifices to his own foolish vanity the cause of justice and the liberty of an unfortunate prisoner?"

Fanferlot started back with a scared look. "I should say," he stammered, "I should say—"

"You would say this man ought to be punished, and dismissed from his employment; and you are right. The less a profession is honoured, the more honourable should those be who belong to it. And yet you have been false to yours. Ah! Master Squirrel, we are ambitious, and we try to make the police service forward our own views! We let justice go astray, and we go on a different tack. One must be a more cunning blood-hound than you are, my friend, to be able to hunt without a huntsman. You are too self-reliant by half."

"But, my chief, I swear—"

"Silence! Do you pretend to say that you did your duty, and told all you knew to the investigating magistrate? Whilst others were giving information against the cashier, you were getting up evidence against the banker. You watch his movements: you became intimate with his valet."

Was M. Lecoq really angry, or pretending to be so? Fanferlot, who knew him well, was puzzled as to whether all this indignation was real.

"Still, if you were only skilful," continued M. Lecoq, "it would be another matter; but no: you wish to be master, and you are not even fit to be a journeyman."

"You are right, my chief," said Fanferlot piteously, for he saw that it was useless for him to deny anything. "But how could I go about an affair like this, where there was not even a trace, a sign of any kind to start from?"

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders. "You are an ass!" exclaimed he. "Why, don't you know that on the very day you were sent for with the commissary to verify the fact of the robbery, you held—I do not say certainly, but very probably held—in your great stupid hands the means of knowing which key had been used when the money was stolen?"

"How is that?"

"You want to know do you? I will tell you. Do you remember the scratch you discovered on the safe? You were so struck by it, that you could not refrain from calling out directly you saw it. You carefully examined it, and were convinced that it was a fresh scratch, only a few hours old. You thought, and rightly too, that this scratch was made at the time of the theft. Now, with what was it made? Evidently with a key. That being the case, you should have asked for the keys both of the banker and the cashier. One of them would have probably had some particles of the hard green paint sticking to it."

Fanferlot listened with open mouth to this explanation. At the last words, he violently slapped his forehead with his hand and cried out: "Idiot! Idiot!"

"You have correctly named yourself," said M. Lecoq. "Idiot! This proof stares you right in the face, and you don't see it! This scratch is the only clue there is to follow, and you must like a fool neglect it. If I find the guilty party, it will be by means of this scratch; and I am determined that I will find him."

At a distance the Squirrel very bravely abuses and defies M. Lecoq; but, in his presence, he yields to the influence which this extraordinary man exercises upon all who approach him. This exact information, these minute details just given him, so upset his mind that he could not imagine where and how M. Lecoq had obtained them. Finally he humbly said: "You have then been occupying yourself with this case, my chief?"

"Probably I have; but I am not infallible, and may have overlooked some important evidence. Take a seat, and tell me all you know."

M. Lecoq was not the man to be hood-winked, so Fanferlot told the exact truth, a rare thing for him to do. However, as he reached the end of his statement, a feeling of mortified vanity prevented his telling how he had been fooled by Nina and the stout man. Unfortunately for poor Fanferlot, M. Lecoq was always fully informed on every subject in which he interested himself. "It seems to me, Master Squirrel," said he, "that you have forgotten something. How far did you follow the empty cab?"

Fanferlot blushed, and hung his head like a guilty schoolboy. "Oh, my chief!" he cried, "and you know all about that too! How could you have—" But a sudden idea flashed across his mind, he stopped short, bounded off his chair, and exclaimed: "Oh! I know now: you were the stout gentleman with the red whiskers."

His surprise gave so singular an expression to his face that M. Lecoq could not restrain a smile. "Then it was you!" continued the bewildered detective; "you were the stout gentleman, at whom I stared, so as to impress his appearance upon my mind, and I never recognised you! You would make a superb actor, my chief, if you would go on the stage; but I was disguised too—very well disguised."

"Very poorly disguised: it is only just to you that I should let you know what a failure it was, Fanferlot. Do you think that a big beard and a blouse are a sufficient transformation? The eye is the thing to be changed—the eye! The art lies in being able to change the eye. That is the secret." This theory of disguise explained why the lynx-eyed Lecoq never appeared at the Prefecture of Police without his gold spectacles.

"Then, my chief," said Fanferlot, clinging to his idea, "you have been more successful than Madame Alexandre; you have made the little girl confess? You know why she leaves the Grand Archangel, why she does not wait for M. de Lagors, and why she has bought herself some cotton dresses?"

"She is following my advice."

"That being the case," said the detective dejectedly, "there is nothing left for me to do, but to acknowledge myself an ass."

"No, Squirrel," said M. Lecoq kindly, "you are not an ass. You merely did wrong in undertaking a task beyond your capacity. Have you progressed one step since you started in this affair? No. That shows that, although you are incomparable as a lieutenant, you do not possess the

qualities of a general. I am going to present you with an aphorism; remember it, and let it be your guide in the future: *A man can shine in the second rank, who would be totally eclipsed in the first.*"

Never had Fanferlot seen his chief so talkative and good-natured. Finding his deceit discovered, he had expected to be overwhelmed with a storm of anger; whereas he had escaped with a little shower that had cooled his brain. Lecoq's anger disappeared like one of those heavy clouds which threaten in the horizon for a moment, and then are suddenly swept away by a gust of wind.

But this unexpected affability made Fanferlot feel uneasy. He was afraid that something might be concealed beneath it. "Do you know who the thief is, my chief?" he inquired.

"I know no more than you do, Fanferlot; and you seem to have made up your mind, whereas I am still undecided. You declare the cashier to be innocent, and the banker guilty. I don't know whether you are right or wrong. I follow after you, and have got no further than the preliminaries of my investigation. I am certain of but one thing, and that is, the scratch on the safe-door. That scratch is my starting-point."

As he spoke, M. Lecoq took from his desk an immense sheet of paper which he unrolled. On this paper was photographed the door of M. Fauvel's safe. Every detail was rendered perfectly. There were the five movable buttons with the engraved letters, and the narrow, projecting brass lock. The scratch was indicated with great exactness.

"Now," said M. Lecoq, "here is our scratch. It runs from top to bottom, starting diagonally, from the keyhole, and proceeding from left to right; that is to say it terminates on the side next to the private staircase leading to the banker's apartments. Although very deep at the keyhole, it ends in a scarcely perceptible mark."

"Yes, my chief, I see all that."

"Naturally you thought that this scratch was made by the person who took the money. Let us see if you were right. I have here a little iron box, painted green like M. Fauvel's safe; here it is. Take a key, and try to scratch it."

"The deuce take it!" said Fanferlot after several attempts, "this paint is awfully hard to move!"

"Very hard, my friend, and yet that on the safe is harder still, and more solid. So you see the scratch you discovered could not have been made by the trembling hand of a thief letting the key slip."

"Sapristi!" exclaimed Fanferlot amazed; "I never should have thought of that. It certainly required great force to make the deep scratch on the safe."

"Yes, but how was that force applied? I have been racking my brain for three days, and it was only yesterday that I came to a conclusion. Let us examine if my conjectures present enough chances of probability to establish a starting-point."

M. Lecoq put the photograph aside, and, walking to the door communicating with his bedroom, took the key from the lock, and, holding it in his hands, said: "Come here, Fanferlot, and stand by my side, there; very well. Now suppose that I want to open this door, and that you don't wish me to open it; when you see me about to insert the key, what would be your first impulse?"

"To put my hands on your arm, and draw it towards me so as to prevent your introducing the key."

"Precisely so. Now let us try it; go on." Fanferlot obeyed; and the key held by M. Lecoq, pulled aside from the lock, slipped along the door, and traced upon it, from above to below a diagonal scratch, the exact reproduction of the one in the photograph.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Fanferlot in three different tones of admiration, as he stood gazing in a reverie at the door.

"Do you begin to understand?" asked M. Lecoq.

"Understand, my chief? Why, a child could understand it now. Ah, what a man you are! I see the scene as if I had been there. Two persons were present at the robbery; one wished to take the money, the other wished to prevent its being taken. That is clear, that is certain."

Accustomed to triumphs of this sort, M. Lecoq was much amused at Fanferlot's enthusiasm. "There you go off, half-primed again," he said good humouredly; "you regard as certain proof a circumstance which may be accidental, and at the most only probable."

"No, my chief; no! a man like you could not be mistaken; doubt is no longer possible."

"That being the case, what deductions would you draw from our discovery?"

"In the first place, it proves that I am correct in thinking the cashier innocent."

"How so?"

"Because, being at perfect liberty to open the safe whenever he wished to do so, it is not likely that he would have had a witness present when he intended to commit the theft."

"Well reasoned, Fanferlot. But on this supposition the banker would be equally innocent; reflect a little."

Fanferlot reflected, and all his confidence vanished. "You are right," he said in a despairing tone. "What can be done now?"

"Look for the third rogue, or rather the real rogue, the one who opened the safe, and stole the notes, and who is still at large, while others are suspected."

"Impossible, my chief, impossible! Don't you know that M. Fauvel and his cashier had keys, and they only? And they always kept these keys in their possession."

"On the evening of the robbery the banker left his key in his *escritoire*."

"Yes; but the key alone was not sufficient to open the safe; it was necessary that the word also should be known."

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "What was the word?" he asked.

"Gipsy."

"Which is the name of the cashier's mistress. Now keep your eyes open. The day you find a man sufficiently intimate with Prosper to be aware of all the circumstances connected with this name, and who is at the same time on such a footing with the Fauvel family as would give him the privilege of entering M. Fauvel's chamber, then, and not until then, will you discover the guilty party. On that day the problem will be solved."

Self-sufficient and vain, like all famous men, M. Lecoq had never had a pupil, and never wished to have one. He worked alone, because he hated assistants, wishing to share neither the pleasures of success nor the pain of defeat. Thus Fanferlot, who knew his chief's character, was astonished to hear him giving advice, who heretofore had only given orders. He was so puzzled, that in spite of his pre-occupation he could not help betraying his

surprise. "My chief," he ventured to say, "you seem to take a great interest in this affair, you have so deeply studied it."

M. Lecoq started nervously, and replied, frowning: "You are too curious Master Squirrel; be careful that you do not go too far. Do you understand?"

Fanferlot began to apologise.

"That will do," interrupted M. Lecoq. "If I choose to lend you a helping hand, it is because it suits my fancy to do so. It pleases me to be the head, and to let you be the hand. Unassisted, with your preconceived ideas, you never would have found the culprit; if we two together don't find him, my name is not Lecoq."

"We shall certainly succeed, as you interest yourself in the case."

"Yes, I am interested in it, and during the last four days I have discovered many important facts. But listen to me. I have reasons for not appearing in this affair. No matter what happens, I forbid you mentioning my name. If we succeed, all the success must be attributed to you. And, above all, don't try to find out what I choose to keep from you. Be satisfied with what explanations I give you. Now, be careful."

These conditions seemed to suit Fanferlot perfectly. "I will obey your instructions and be discreet," he replied.

"I shall rely upon you," continued M. Lecoq. "Now, to begin, you must carry this photograph to the investigating magistrate. I know M. Patrigent is much perplexed about the case. Explain to him as if it were your own discovery, what I have just shown you; repeat for his benefit the experiment we have performed, and I am convinced that this evidence will determine him to release the cashier. Prosper must be at liberty before I can commence my operations."

"Of course, my chief; but must I let him know that I suspect any one besides the banker or cashier?"

"Certainly. The authorities must not be kept in ignorance of your intention of following up this affair. M. Patrigent will tell you to watch Prosper; you will reply that you will not lose sight of him. I myself will answer for his being in safe keeping."

"Suppose he asks me about Nina Gipsy?"

M. Lecoq hesitated for a moment. "Tell him," he finally said, "that you persuaded her, in the interest of Prosper, to live in a house where she can watch some one whom you suspect."

Fanferlot rolled up the photograph and joyously seized hold of his hat, intending to depart, when M. Lecoq checked him by waving his hand, and said: "I have not finished yet. Do you know how to drive a carriage and manage horses?"

"How can you ask such a question as this, my chief, of a man who used to be a rider in the Bouthor Circus?"

"Very good. As soon as the magistrate dismisses you, return home immediately, obtain for yourself a wig and the complete dress of a valet; and, when you are ready, take this letter to the agency for servants at the corner of the Passage Delorme."

"But, my chief—"

"There must be no but, my friend; the agent will send you to M. de Clameran, who is wanting a valet, his man having left him yesterday."

"Excuse me, if I venture to suggest that I think you are labouring under a wrong impression. This De Clameran is not the cashier's friend."

"Why do you always interrupt me?" said M. Lecoq imperiously. "Do

what I tell you, and don't disturb your mind about the rest. I know that De Clameran is not a friend of Prosper's; but he is the friend and protector of Raoul de Lagors. Why so? Whence the intimacy of these two men of such different ages? That is what I must find out. I must also find out who this iron-master is who spends all his time in Paris, and never goes to look after his forges. An individual, who takes it into his head to live at the Hotel du Louvre, in the midst of a constantly changing crowd, is a fellow difficult to watch. Through you I will keep an eye upon him. He has a carriage, which you will have to drive; and you will soon be able to give me an account of his manner of life, and of the sort of people with whom he associates."

"You shall be obeyed, my chief."

"Another thing. M. de Clameran is irritable and suspicious. You will be presented to him under the name of Joseph Dubois. He will ask for certificates of your good character. Here are three, which state that you have lived with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and the Count de Commarin, and that you have just left the Baron de Wortschen, who went to Germany the other day. Now keep your eyes open; be careful of your get-up and manners. Be polite, but not excessively so. And, above all things, don't be too honest: it might arouse suspicion."

"I understand, my chief. Where shall I report to you?"

"I will see you every day. Until I tell you differently, don't put foot in this house; you might be followed. If anything important should happen, send a telegram to your wife, and she will inform me. Go, and be prudent."

The door closed on Fanferlot as M. Lecoq passed into his bedroom. In the twinkling of an eye the latter divested himself of the appearance of chief detective. He took off his stiff cravat and gold spectacles, and removed the close wig from his thick black hair. The official Lecoq had disappeared, leaving in his place the genuine Lecoq whom nobody knew—a good-looking young man, with a bold, determined manner, and brilliant, piercing eyes. But he only remained himself for an instant. Seated before a dressing-table covered with more cosmetics, paints, perfumes, false hair, and other shams, than are to be found on the toilet-tables of our modern belles, he began to undo the work of nature and to make himself a new face. He worked slowly, handling his brushes with great care. But in an hour he had accomplished one of his daily masterpieces. When he had finished, he was no longer Lecoq: he was the stout gentleman with red whiskers, whom Fanferlot had failed to recognise.

"Well," he said, casting a last look in the mirror, "I have forgotten nothing: I have left nothing to chance. All my plans are fixed; and I shall make some progress to-day, provided the Squirrel does not waste time."

But Fanferlot was too happy to waste even a minute. He did not run, he flew, towards the Palais de Justice. At last he was able to convince some one that he, Fanferlot, was a man of wonderful perspicacity. As to acknowledging that he was about to obtain a triumph with the ideas of another man, he never thought of such a thing. It is generally in perfect good faith that the jackdaw struts about in the peacock's feathers.

Fanferlot's hopes were not deceived. If the magistrate was not absolutely convinced, he admired the ingenuity and shrewdness of the whole proceeding. "This decides me," he said, as he dismissed Fanferlot. "I will draw up a favourable report to-day; and it is highly probable that the accused

will be released to-morrow." He began at once to write out one of those terrible decisions of "Not proven," which restores liberty, but not honour, to the accused man ; which says that he is not guilty, but does not say that he is innocent :

"Whereas sufficient proofs are wanting against the accused, Prosper Bertomy, in pursuance of Article 128 of the Criminal Code, we hereby declare that no grounds at present exist for prosecuting the aforesaid prisoner ; and we order that he be released from the prison where he is confined, and set at liberty by the jailer," &c.

"Well," said he to the clerk, "here we have another of those crimes which justice cannot clear up. The mystery remains to be solved. There is another dossier to be stowed away among the police records." And with his own hand he wrote on the cover of the bundle of papers relating to Prosper's case, its number of rotation : *Dossier No. 113.*

VII.

PROSPER had been languishing in his cell for nine days, when one Thursday morning the jailer came to inform him of the magistrate's decision. He was conducted before the officer who had searched him when he was arrested ; and his watch, penknife, and several small articles of jewellery, were restored to him ; then he was told to sign a large sheet of paper, which he did.

He was next led across a dark passage, and almost pushed through a door, which was abruptly shut upon him. He found himself on the quay : he was alone ; he was free.

Free ! Justice had confessed her inability to convict him of the crime of which he was accused. Free ! He could walk about, he could breathe the fresh air ; but every door would be closed against him. Only acquittal after due trial would restore him to his former position among men. A decision of "Not proven" had left him exposed to continual suspicion.

The torments inflicted by public opinion are more fearful than those endured in a prison cell. At the moment of his restoration to liberty, Prosper suffered so cruelly from the horror of his situation, that he could not repress a cry of rage and despair. "I am innocent ! God knows I am innocent !" he cried out. But of what use was his anger ? Two strangers, who were passing, stopped to look at him, and said pityingly : "The poor fellow is crazy."

The Seine was at his feet. A thought of suicide crossed his mind. "No," he said, "no ! I have not even the right to kill myself. No : I will not die until I have proved my innocence !"

Often, day and night, had Prosper repeated these words, as he walked his cell. With a heart filled with a bitter, determined thirst for vengeance, which gives a man the force and patience to destroy or wear out all obstacles in his way, he would say : "Oh ! why am I not at liberty ? I am helpless, caged up ; but let me once be free !" Now he was free ; and for the first time he saw the difficulties of the task before him. For each crime, justice requires a criminal ; he could not establish his own innocence without producing the guilty individual, how was he to find the thief and hand him over to the law ?

Despondent, but not discouraged, Prosper turned in the direction of his apartments. He was beset by a thousand anxieties. What had taken

place during the nine days that he had been cut off from all intercourse with his friends? No news of them had reached him. He had heard no more of what was going on in the outside world, than if his secret cell had been a tomb. He walked slowly along the streets, with his eyes cast down, dreading to meet some familiar face. He, who had always been so haughty, would now be pointed at with the finger of scorn. He would be greeted with cold looks and averted faces. Men would refuse to shake hands with him. Still, if he could count on only one true friend! Yes, only one. But what friend would believe him when his father, who should have been the last to suspect him, had refused to believe him?

In the midst of his sufferings, when he felt almost overwhelmed by the sense of his wretched, lonely condition, Prosper thought of Nina Gipsy. He had never loved the poor girl: indeed, at times he almost hated her; but now he felt a longing to see her, because he knew that she loved him, and that nothing would make her think him guilty; because, too, woman remains true and firm in her belief, and is always faithful in the hour of adversity, although she sometimes fails in prosperity.

On reaching his house in the Rue Chaptal, Prosper hesitated at the moment he was about to cross the threshold. He suffered from the tinidity which an honest man always feels when he knows he is regarded with suspicion. He dreaded meeting any one whom he knew; still he could not remain in the street, so he entered. When the concierge saw him, he uttered an exclamation of glad surprise, and said: "Ah, here you are at last, sir. I told every one you would come out as white as snow; and, when I read in the papers that you were arrested for robbery, I said, 'My third-floor lodger a thief! Never would I believe such a thing, never!'"

The congratulations of this ignorant man were sincere, and came from pure kindness of heart; but they impressed Prosper painfully, and he cut them short by abruptly exclaiming: "Madame of course has left; can you tell me where she has gone?"

"Dear me, no, I cannot. The day of your arrest, she sent for a cab and left with her trunks, and no one has seen or heard of her since."

This was another blow to the unhappy cashier. "And where are my servants?"

"Gone, sir. Your father paid them their wages, and discharged them."

"I suppose, then, you have my key?"

"No, sir; when your father left here this morning at eight o'clock, he told me that a friend of his would take charge of your rooms until you returned. Of course you know who he is—a stout gentleman with red whiskers."

Prosper was astounded. What could be the meaning of one of his father's friends occupying his rooms? He did not, however, betray his surprise, but quietly said: "Yes, I know who it is."

He quickly ran up the stairs, and knocked at his door, which was at once opened by his father's friend. He had been accurately described by the concierge. A stout man, with a red face, full lips, sharp eyes, and of rather coarse manners, stood bowing to Prosper, who had never seen him before. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said he.

He seemed to be perfectly at home. On the table lay a book, which he had taken from the bookcase; and he appeared ready to do the honours of the place.

"I must say, sir," began Prosper.

"That you are surprised to find me here? So I suppose. Your father

intended introducing me to you ; but he was compelled to return to Beaucaire this morning ; and let me add that he departed thoroughly convinced, as I myself am, that you never took a sou from M. Fauvel.

At this unexpected good news, Prosper's face lit up with pleasure.

"Here is a letter from your father, which I hope will serve as an introduction between us."

Prosper opened the letter ; and as he read his eyes grew brighter, and a slight colour returned to his pale face. When he had finished he held out his hand to the stout gentleman, and said : "My father tells me, sir, that you are his best friend ; he advises me to have absolute confidence in you, and to follow your advice."

"Exactly. This morning your father said to me : 'Verduret'—that is my name—'Verduret, my son is in great trouble, and must be helped out of it.' I replied : 'I am both ready and willing,' and here I am to assist you. Now the ice is broken, is it not ? Then let us go to work at once. What do you intend doing ?"

This question revived Prosper's slumbering rage. His eyes flashed. "What do I intend doing ?" said he angrily ; "what should I do but seek the villain who has ruined me ?"

"So I supposed ; but have you any means of success ?"

"None ; yet I shall succeed, because, when a man devotes his whole life to the accomplishment of an object, he is certain to achieve it."

"Well said, M. Prosper ; and, to be frank, I fully expected that this would be your purpose. I have therefore already begun to think and act for you. I have a plan. In the first place, you will sell this furniture, and disappear from the neighbourhood."

"Disappear !" cried Prosper indignantly ; "disappear ! Why, sir ? do you not see that such a step would be a confession of guilt, would authorise the world to say that I am hiding so as to enjoy undisturbed the stolen 350,000 francs ?"

"Well, what then ?" said the man with the red whiskers ; "did you not say just now that the sacrifice of your life is made ? The expert swimmer thrown into the river, after being robbed, is careful not to rise to the surface immediately : on the contrary, he plunges beneath, and remains there as long as his breath holds out. He comes up again at a great distance off, and lands out of sight ; then, when he is supposed to be dead, he suddenly reappears and has his revenge. You have an enemy ? Some petty imprudence will betray him. But, while he sees you standing by on the watch, he will be on his guard."

It was with a sort of amazed submission that Prosper listened to this man, who, though a friend of his father, was an utter stranger to himself. He submitted unconsciously to the ascendancy of a nature so much more energetic and forcible than his own. In his helpless condition he was grateful for friendly assistance, and said : "I will follow your advice, sir."

"I was sure you would, my dear fellow. Let us reflect upon the course you ought to pursue. And remember that you will need every franc of the proceeds of the sale. Have you any ready money ? no, but you must have some. Knowing that you would need this at once, I have already spoken to an upholsterer ; and he will give you twelve thousand francs for everything, minus the pictures."

The cashier could not refrain from shrugging his shoulders, which M. Verduret observed. "Well," said he, "it is rather hard, I admit, but it is a necessity. Now listen : you are the invalid, and I am the doctor

charged to cure you ; if I cut to the quick, you will have to endure it. It is the only way to save you."

"Cut away then," answered Prosper.

"Well, we will make haste, for time presses. You have a friend, M. de Lagors?"

"Raoul? Yes, he is an intimate friend of mine."

"Now tell me, who is this fellow?"

The term "fellow" seemed to offend Prosper. "M. de Lagors," he said haughtily, "is M. Fauvel's nephew; he is a wealthy young man, handsome, intelligent, cultivated, and the best friend I have."

"Hum!" said M. Verduret, "I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of one adorned by so many charming qualities. I must let you know that I wrote him a note in your name asking him to come here, and he sent word that he would come."

"What! do you suppose—"

"Oh, I suppose nothing! Only I must see this young man. Also, I have arranged and will submit to you a little plan of conversation—" A ring at the outer door interrupted M. Verduret. "The deuce!" exclaimed he; "adieu to my plan; here he is! Where can I hide so as to both hear and see?"

"There, in my bedroom; leave the door open and the curtain down."

A second ring was heard. "Now remember, Prosper," said M. Verduret in a warning tone, "not one word to this man about your plans, or about me. Pretend to be discouraged, helpless, and undecided what to do." And he disappeared behind the curtain, as Prosper ran to open the door.

Prosper's portrait of M. de Lagors was no exaggerated one. Such an open and handsome countenance, and manly figure, could belong only to a noble character. Although Raoul said that he was twenty-four, he appeared to be not more than twenty. He had a fine figure, well knit and supple; an abundance of light chestnut-coloured hair, curled over his intelligent-looking forehead, and his large blue eyes, which beamed with candour. His first impulse was to throw himself into Prosper's arms. "My poor, dear friend!" he said, "my poor Prosper!"

But beneath these affectionate demonstrations there was a certain constraint, which, if it escaped the perception of the cashier, was noticed by M. Verduret. "Your letter, my dear Prosper," said Raoul, "made me almost ill, I was so frightened by it. I asked myself if you could have lost your mind. Then I put aside everything, to hasten to your assistance; and here I am."

Prosper did not seem to hear him; his thoughts were occupied with the letter which he had not written. What were its contents? Who was this stranger whose assistance he had accepted?

"You must not feel discouraged," continued M. de Lagors; "you are young enough to commence life anew. Your friends are still left to you. I have come to say to you: 'Rely upon me; I am rich, half of my fortune is at your disposal.'"

This generous offer, made at a moment like this with such frank simplicity, deeply touched Prosper. "Thanks, Raoul," he said with emotion, "thank you! But unfortunately all the money in the world would be of no use now."

"Why so? What, then, are you going to do? Do you propose to remain in Paris?"

"I know not, Raoul. I have formed no plans yet. My mind is too confused for me to think."

"I will tell you what to do," resumed Raoul quickly; "you must start afresh; until this mysterious robbery is explained you must keep away from Paris. Excuse my frankness, but it will never do for you to remain here."

"And suppose it never should be explained?"

"Only the more reason for your remaining in oblivion. I have been talking about you to De Clameran. 'If I were in Prosper's place,' he said, 'I would turn everything into money, and embark for America; there I would make a fortune, and return to crush with my millions those who have suspected me.'"

This advice offended Prosper's pride, but he interposed no kind of objection. He was recalling to mind what his unknown visitor had said to him. "I will think it over," he finally observed. "I will see. I should like to know what M. Fauvel says."

"My uncle? I suppose you know that I have declined the offer he made me to enter his banking-house, and we have almost quarrelled. I have not set foot in his house for over a month; but I hear of him occasionally."

"Through whom?"

"Through your friend Cavaillon. My uncle, they say, is more distressed by this affair than you are. He does not attend to his business, and seems as though he had just recovered from some serious illness."

"And Madame Fauvel, and—" Prosper hesitated—"and Mademoiselle Madeleine, how are they?"

"Oh," said Raoul lightly, "my aunt is as pious as ever; she has mass said for the benefit of the sinner. As to my handsome, icy cousin, she cannot bring herself down to common matters, because she is entirely absorbed in preparing for the fancy ball to be given the day after to-morrow by MM. Jandidier. She has discovered, so one of her friends told me, a wonderful dressmaker, a stranger who has suddenly appeared from no one knows where, and who is making for her a costume of one of Catherine de Médicis' maids of honour. I hear it is to be a marvel of beauty."

Excessive suffering brings with it a kind of dull insensibility and stupor; but this last remark of M. de Lagors' touched Prosper to the quick, and he murmured faintly: "Madeleine! O Madeleine!"

M. de Lagors, pretending not to have heard him, rose from his chair, and said: "I must leave you now, my dear Prosper; on Saturday I shall see these ladies at the ball, and will bring you news of them. Now, take courage, and remember that, whatever happens, you have a friend in me."

Raoul shook Prosper by the hand and departed, leaving the latter standing immovable and overcome by disappointment. He was aroused from his gloomy reverie by hearing the red-whiskered man say in a bantering tone, "So this is one of your friends?"

"Yes," said Prosper with bitterness. "Yet you heard him offer me half of his fortune?"

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders with an air of compassion. "That was very stingy on his part," said he; "why did he not offer the whole? Offers cost nothing; although I have no doubt that this sweet youth would cheerfully give ten thousand francs to put the ocean between you and him."

"What reason, sir, would he have for doing this?"

"Who knows? Perhaps for the same reason that he told you he had not set foot in his uncle's house for a month."

"But that is the truth, I am sure of it."

"Naturally," said M. Verduret with a provoking smile. "But," continued he with a serious air, "we have devoted enough time to this Adonis, whose measure I have taken. Now, be good enough to change your dress, and we will go and call on M. Fauvel."

This proposal aroused Prosper's anger. "Never!" he exclaimed excitedly; "no, never will I voluntarily set eyes on that wretch!"

This resistance did not surprise M. Verduret. "I can understand your feelings towards him," said he; "but at the same time I hope you will change your mind. For the same reason that I wished to see M. de Lagors, I desire to see M. Fauvel; it is necessary, you understand. Are you so very weak that you cannot constrain yourself for five minutes? I shall introduce myself as one of your relatives, and you need not open your lips."

"If it is positively necessary," said Prosper, "if—"

"It is necessary; so come on. You must have confidence, and put on a brave face. Hurry and make yourself trim; it is getting late, and I am hungry. We will lunch on our way there."

Prosper had hardly passed into his bedroom when the bell rang again. M. Verduret opened the door. It was the concierge, who handed him a bulky letter, and said: "This letter was left this morning for M. Bertomy; I was so flustered when he came that I forgot to hand it to him. It is a very odd-looking letter; is it not, sir?"

It was indeed a most peculiar missive. The address was not written, but formed of printed letters, carefully cut from a book, and pasted on the envelope.

"Oh, ho! what is this?" cried M. Verduret; then turning towards the man he said: "Wait a moment." He went into the next room, and closed the door behind him. There he found Prosper, anxious to know what was going on. "Here is a letter for you," observed M. Verduret.

Prosper at once tore open the envelope. Some bank notes dropped out; he counted them; there were ten. The cashier turned very red. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"We will read the letter and find out," replied Verduret.

The letter, like the address, was composed of printed words cut out and pasted on a sheet of paper. It was short but explicit:—

"My dear Prosper,—A friend, who knows the horror of your situation, sends you this succour. There is one heart, be assured, that shares your sufferings. Go away—leave France. You are young; the future is before you. Go, and may this money bring you happiness!"

As M. Verduret read the note, Prosper's rage increased. He was angry and perplexed, for he could not explain the rapidly succeeding events which were so calculated to mystify his already confused brain. "Everybody wishes me to go away," he cried; "there is evidently a conspiracy against me."

M. Verduret smiled with satisfaction. "At last you begin to open your eyes, you begin to understand. Yes, there are people who hate you because of the wrong they have done you; there are people to whom your presence in Paris is a constant danger, and who will not feel safe till they are rid of you."

"But who are these people? Tell me, who dares send this money?"

"If I knew, my dear Prosper, my task would be at an end, for then I should know who committed the robbery. But we will continue our researches. I have finally procured evidence which will sooner or later

become convincing proof. I have heretofore only made deductions more or less probable; I now possess knowledge which proves that I was not mistaken. I walked in darkness: now I have a light to guide me."

As Prosper listened to M. Verduret's reassuring words, he felt hope rising in his breast.

"Now," said M. Verduret, "we must take advantage of this evidence, gained by the imprudence of our enemies, without delay. We will begin with the concierge."

He opened the door, and called out: "I say, my good man, step here a moment."

The concierge entered, looking very much surprised at the authority exercised over his lodger by this stranger.

"Who gave you this letter?" asked M. Verduret.

"A messenger, who said he was paid for bringing it."

"Do you know him?"

"I know him well; he is the commissionaire whose post is at the corner of the Rue Pigalle."

"Go and bring him here."

After the concierge had gone, M. Verduret drew his diary from his pocket, and compared a page of it with the notes which he had spread over the table. "These notes were not sent by the thief," he said, after an attentive examination of them.

"Do you think so?"

"I am confident of it; that is, unless he is endowed with extraordinary penetration and forethought. One thing is certain: these ten thousand francs are not part of the three hundred and fifty thousand which were stolen from the safe."

"Yet," said Prosper, who could not account for this certainty on the part of his protector, "yet—"

"There is no yet about it: I have the numbers of all the stolen notes."

"What! When even I did not know them myself?"

"But the Bank did, fortunately. When we undertake an affair we must anticipate everything, and forget nothing. It is a poor excuse for a man to say, 'I did not think of it,' when he commits some oversight. I thought of the Bank."

If in the beginning Prosper had felt some repugnance about confiding in his father's friend, the feeling had now disappeared. He understood that alone, scarcely master of himself, governed only by the inspirations of inexperience, he would never have had the patient perspicacity of this singular man.

Verduret continued, talking to himself, as if he had absolutely forgotten Prosper's presence: "Then, as this missive did not come from the thief, it can only come from the other person, who was near the safe at the time of the robbery, but could not prevent it, and now feels remorse. The probability of two persons assisting at the robbery, a probability suggested by the scratch, is now converted into a certainty. *Ergo*, I was right."

Prosper listening attentively tried hard to comprehend this monologue, which he dared not interrupt.

"Let us seek," the stout man went on to say, "this second person, whose conscience pricks him, and yet who dares not reveal anything." Here he read the letter over several times, scanning the sentences, and weighing every word. "Evidently this letter was composed by a woman," he finally said. "Never would a man doing another man a service, and sending

him money, use the word 'succour.' A man would have said, loan, money, or some other equivalent, but succour, never. No one but a woman, ignorant of masculine susceptibilities, would have naturally made use of this word to express the idea it represents. As to the sentence, 'There is one heart' and so on, it could only have been written by a woman."

"You are mistaken, sir, I think," said Prosper; "no woman is mixed up in this affair."

M. Verduret paid no attention to this interruption; perhaps he did not hear it, perhaps he did not care to argue the matter. "Now, let us see if we can discover whence the printed words were taken to compose this letter."

He went to the window, and began to study the pasted words with all the scrupulous attention which an antiquary would devote to an old, half-effaced manuscript. "Small type," he said, "very slender and clear; the paper is thin and glossy. Consequently, these words have not been cut from a newspaper, magazine, or even a novel. Yet I have seen type like this—I recognise it, I am sure Didot often uses it, so does Mame of Tours."

He suddenly stopped, his mouth open, and his eyes fixed, appealing as though anxiously to his memory. Suddenly he struck his forehead exultingly. "Now I have it!" he cried; "now I have it! Why did I not see it at once? These words have all been cut from a prayer-book. We will look, at least, and then we shall be certain."

He moistened one of the words pasted on the paper with his tongue, and when it was sufficiently softened, he detached it with a pin. On the other side of this word was the Latin word, *Deus*.

"Ah, ha!" he exclaimed with a little laugh of satisfaction, "I knew it. Old Tabaret would be pleased to see this. But what has become of the mutilated prayer-book? Can it have been burned? No, because a heavy-bound book is not easily burned. It has been thrown aside in some corner."

He was here interrupted by the concierge, who returned with the commissionaire from the Rue Pigalle.

"Ah, here you are," said M. Verduret, encouragingly. Then he showed him the envelope of the letter, and asked: "Do you remember bringing this letter here this morning?"

"Perfectly, sir. I took particular notice of the direction; we don't often see anything like it."

"Who told you to bring it?—a gentleman, or a lady?"

"Neither, sir; it was a commissionaire."

This reply made the concierge laugh very much, but not a muscle of M. Verduret's face moved.

"A commissionaire? Well, do you know this colleague of yours?"

"I never even saw him before."

"What was he like?"

"He was neither tall nor short; he wore a green velvet jacket, and his badge."

"Your description is so vague that it would suit every commissionaire in the city; but did your colleague tell you who sent the letter?"

"No, sir. He simply put ten sous in my hand, and said: 'Here, carry this to No. 39 Rue Chaptal; a cabman on the boulevard handed it to me.' Ten sous! I warrant you he made more than that by it."

This answer seemed to disconcert M. Verduret. The taking of so many precautions to send this letter disturbed him, and upset all his plans.

"Do you think you would recognise the commissionaire again?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, if I saw him."

"How much do you gain a day as a commissioner?"

"I can't exactly tell; but mine is a good corner, and I am busy going errands nearly all day. I suppose I make from eight to ten francs."

"Very well: I will give you ten francs a day if you will walk about the streets, and look for the commissioner who gave you this letter. Every evening, at eight o'clock, come to the Grand Archangel, on the Quai Saint Michel, to give me a report of your search and receive your pay. Ask for M. Verduret. If you find the man I will give you fifty francs. Do you agree?"

"I should rather think I do."

"Then don't lose a minute. Start off!"

Although ignorant of M. Verduret's plans, Prosper began to comprehend the sense of his investigations. His fate depended upon their success, and yet he almost forgot this fact in his admiration of this singular man; for his energy, his bantering coolness when he wished to discover anything, the certainty of his deductions, the fertility of his expedients, and the rapidity of his movements, were astonishing.

"Do you still think, sir," said Prosper when the men had left the room, "you see a woman's hand in this affair?"

"More than ever; and a pious woman too, who has at least two prayer-books, since she could cut up one to write to you."

"And you hope to find the mutilated book?"

"I do, thanks to the opportunity I have of making an immediate search; which I will set about at once."

Saying this, he sat down, and rapidly scratched off a few lines on a slip of paper, which he folded up, and put in his waistcoat pocket. "Are you ready to go to M. Fauvel's?" he then asked. "Yes? Come on then; we have certainly earned our lunch to-day."

VIII.

WHEN Raoul de Lagors spoke of M. Fauvel's extraordinary dejection, he had been guilty of no exaggeration. Since the fatal day when, upon his denunciation, his cashier had been arrested, the banker, this active, energetic man of business, had been a prey to the most gloomy melancholy, and ceased to take any interest in the affairs of his banking-house.

He, who had always been so devoted to his family, never came near them except at meals, when as soon as he had swallowed a few mouthfuls, he would hastily leave the room. Shut up in his study, he would deny himself to visitors. His anxious countenance, his indifference to everybody and everything, his constant reveries and fits of abstraction, betrayed the presence of some fixed idea or of some hidden sorrow.

The day of Prosper's release, about three o'clock, M. Fauvel was, as usual, seated in his study, with his elbows resting on the table, and his face buried in his hands, when his valet abruptly entered, and with a frightened look said:

"M. Bertomy, the former cashier, is here sir, with one of his relatives; he says he must see you."

At these words the banker jumped up as if he had been shot at. "Prosper!" he cried in a voice choked by anger, "what! does he dare—" Then remembering that he ought to control himself before his servant, he waited

a few moments, and said, in a tone of forced calmness: "Ask the gentlemen to walk in."

If M. Verduret had counted upon witnessing a strange and affecting scene, he was not disappointed. Nothing could be more terrible than the attitude of these two men as they stood confronting each other. The banker's face was almost purple with suppressed anger, and he looked as if he were about to be seized with a fit of apoplexy. Prosper was pale and motionless as a corpse. Silent and immovable, they stood glaring at each other with mortal hatred.

M. Verduret watched these two enemies with the indifference and coolness of a philosopher, who, in the most violent outbursts of human passion, merely see subjects for meditation and study. Finally, the silence becoming more and more threatening, he decided to break it by speaking to the banker:

"I suppose you know, sir," said he, "that my young relative has just been released from prison."

"Yes," replied M. Fauvel making an effort to control himself, "yes, for want of sufficient proof."

"Exactly so, sir; and this want of proof, as stated in the decision of 'Not proven,' ruins the prospects of my relative, and compels him to leave here at once for America."

On hearing this statement, M. Fauvel's features relaxed as if he had been relieved of some fearful agony. "Ah, he is going away," he kept repeating, "he is going abroad." There was no mistaking the insulting intonation of the words, "going away!"

M. Verduret took no notice of M. Fauvel's manner. "It appears to me," he continued in an easy tone, "that Prosper's determination is a wise one. I merely wished him, before leaving Paris, to come and pay his respects to his former chief."

The banker smiled bitterly. "M. Bertomy might have spared us both this painful meeting. I have nothing to say to him, and of course he can have nothing to tell me."

This was a formal dismissal; and M. Verduret, understanding it thus, bowed to M. Fauvel and left the room, accompanied by Prosper, who had not opened his lips.

They had reached the street before Prosper recovered the use of his tongue. "I hope you are satisfied, sir," said he in a gloomy tone. "You exacted this painful step, and I could but acquiesce. Have I gained anything by adding this humiliation to the others which I have had to suffer?"

"You have not, but I have," replied M. Verduret. "I could find no way of gaining access to M. Fauvel, save through you; and now I have found out what I wanted to know. I am convinced that M. Fauvel had nothing to do with the robbery."

"But you know, sir, innocence can be feigned," objected Prosper.

"Certainly, but not to this extent. And this is not all. I wished to find out if M. Fauvel would be accessible to certain suspicions. I can now confidently reply, 'yes.'"

Prosper and his companion had stopped to talk more at their ease, near the corner of the Rue Lafitte, in the middle of a large space which had lately been cleared by pulling down an old house. M. Verduret seemed to be anxious, and was constantly looking around as if he expected some one. He soon uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. At the other end of the vacant space he saw Cavaillon, who was bareheaded and running.

The latter was so excited that he did not even stop to shake hands with Prosper, but darted up to M. Verduret, and said : " They have gone sir ! "

" How long since ? "

" They went about a quarter of an hour ago. "

" The deuce they did ! Then we have not an instant to lose. "

He handed Cavaillon the note he had written some hours before at Prosper's house.

" Here, pass this on, and then return at once to your desk ; you might be missed. It was very imprudent of you to come out without your hat. "

Cavaillon ran off as quickly as he had come. Prosper was astounded. " What ! " he exclaimed. " You know Cavaillon ? "

" So it seems, " answered M. Verduret with a smile. " But we have no time to talk ; come on, we must hurry ! "

" Where are we going now ? "

" You will soon know ; walk fast ! " And he set the example by striding rapidly towards the Rue Lafayette. As they went along he continued talking more to himself than to Prosper.

" Ah, " said he, " it is not by putting both feet in one shoe that one wins a race. The trace once found, we should never rest an instant. When the savage discovers the footprints of an enemy, he follows it persistently, knowing that falling rain or a gust of wind may efface the footprints at any moment. It is the same with us : the most trifling incident may destroy the traces we are following up. "

M. Verduret suddenly stopped before a door bearing the number 81.

" We are going in here, " he said to Prosper ; " come along. "

They went up stairs, and stopped on the second floor before a door over which was inscribed, " Modes and Confections. " A handsome bell-rope was hanging against the wall, but M. Verduret did not touch it. He tapped with the ends of his fingers in a peculiar way, and the door instantly opened as if some one had been watching for his signal on the other side.

A neatly dressed woman of about forty received M. Verduret and Prosper, and quietly ushered them into a small dining-room with several doors opening into it. This woman bowed respectfully to M. Verduret, as if he were some superior being. He scarcely noticed her salutation, but questioned her with a look, which asked : " Well ? "

She nodded affirmatively : " Yes. "

" In there ? " asked M. Verduret in a low tone, pointing to one of the doors.

" No, " replied the woman in the same tone ; " there, in the little parlour. "

M. Verduret opened the door of the room indicated, and pushed Prosper forward, whispering as he did so. " Go in, and keep your presence of mind. "

But this injunction was useless. The instant he cast his eyes round the room into which he had so unceremoniously been pushed without any warning, Prosper exclaimed in a startled voice : " Madeleine ! "

It was indeed M. Fauvel's niece, looking more beautiful than ever. Hers was that calm, dignified beauty which imposes admiration and respect. Standing in the middle of the room, near a table covered with silks and satins, she was arranging a skirt of red velvet embroidered in gold ; probably the dress she was to wear as maid of honour to Catherine de Médicis. At sight of Prosper, all the blood rushed to her face, and her beautiful eyes half closed, as if she were about to faint ; she clung to the table to prevent herself from falling.

Prosper well knew that Madeleine was not one of those cold-hearted women whom nothing could disturb, and who feel sensations, but never a true sentiment. Of a tender, dreamy nature, she betrayed in the minute details of her life the most exquisite delicacy. But she was also proud, and incapable in any way of violating her conscience. When duty spoke, she obeyed.

She recovered from her momentary weakness, and the soft expression of her eyes changed to one of haughty resentment. In an offended tone she said: "What has emboldened you, sir, to be watching my movements? Who gave you permission to follow me—to enter this house?"

Prosper was certainly innocent. He longed with a word to explain what had just happened, but he was powerless to do so, and could only remain silent.

"You promised me upon your honour, sir," continued Madeleine, "that you would never again seek my presence. Is this the way you keep your word?"

"I did promise, mademoiselle, but—" He stopped.

"Oh, speak!"

"So many things have happened since that terrible day, that I think I am excusable in forgetting for one hour an oath torn from me in a moment of blind weakness. It is to chance, at least to another will than my own, that I am indebted for the happiness of once more finding myself near you. Alas! the instant I saw you my heart bounded with joy. I did not think—no, I could not think—that you would prove more pitiless than strangers have been, that you would cast me off when I am so miserable and heart-broken."

Had not Prosper been so agitated he could have read in Madeleine's eyes—those beautiful eyes which had so long been the arbiters of his destiny—the signs of a great inward struggle.

It was, however, in a firm voice that she replied: "You know me well enough, Prosper, to be sure that no blow can strike you without reaching me at the same time. You suffer, I suffer with you: I pity you as a sister would pity a beloved brother."

"A sister!" said Prosper bitterly. "Yes, that was the word you used the day you banished me from your presence. A sister! Then why during three years did you delude me with vain hopes? Was I a brother to you the day we went to Notre Dame de Fourvières—that day when, at the foot of the altar, we swore to love each other for ever and ever, and you fastened around my neck a holy relic and said, 'Wear this always for my sake; never part from it, and it will bring you good fortune?'"

Madeleine attempted to interrupt him by a supplicating gesture; but he did not heed it, and continued with increased bitterness—"One month after that happy day—a year ago—you gave me back my promise, told me to consider myself free from any engagement, and never to come near you again. If I could have discovered in what way I had offended you—but no, you refused to explain. You drove me away, and to obey you I let every one suppose that I had left you of my own accord. You told me that an invincible obstacle had arisen between us, and I believed you, fool that I was! The obstacle was your own heart, Madeleine. I have always worn the relic; but it has not brought me happiness or good fortune."

Pale and motionless as a statue, Madeleine listened with bowed head and weeping eyes to these passionate reproaches.

"I told you to forget me," she murmured.

"Forget!" exclaimed Prosper excitedly, "forget! Can I forget? Is it in my power to stop, by an effort of will, the circulation of my blood? Ah! you have never loved! To forget, as to stop the beatings of the heart, there is but one means—death!"

This word, uttered with the fixed determination of a desperate, reckless man, caused Madeleine to shudder.

"Miserable man!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, miserable man, and a thousand times more miserable than you can imagine! You can never understand the tortures I have suffered, when for a year past I have awoke every morning, and said to myself, 'It is all over, she has ceased to love me!' This great sorrow stares me in the face day and night in spite of all my efforts to dispel it. And you speak of forgetting! I sought it in poisoned cups, but found it not. I tried to extinguish this memory of the past, which burns within me like a devouring flame, but in vain. When my body succumbed, my pitiless thoughts still survived. Do you wonder then, that I should seek that rest which can only be obtained by suicide?"

"I forbid you to utter that word."

"You forget, Madeleine, that you have no right to forbid me now you love me no more."

With an imperious gesture, Madeleine interrupted him as if she wished to speak, and perhaps to explain all, to exculpate herself. But a sudden thought arrested her; she clasped her hands despairingly, and cried: "My God! this suffering is beyond endurance!"

Prosper seemed to misconstrue her words. "Your pity comes too late," he said. "There is no happiness in store for one like myself, who has had a glimpse of divine felicity, has had the cup of bliss held to his lips, and then dashed to the ground. There is nothing left to attach me to life. You have destroyed my holiest beliefs. I come forth from prison disgraced by my enemies; what is to become of me? Vainly do I question the future; for me there is no hope of happiness. I look around me to see nothing but abandonment, ignominy, and despair!"

"Prosper, my brother, my friend, if you only knew—"

"I know but one thing, Madeleine, which is, that you no longer love me, and that I love you more madly than ever. O Madeleine, God only knows how I love you!"

He was silent. He hoped for an answer. None came. But suddenly the silence was broken by a stifled sob. It was Madeleine's maid, who, seated in a corner, was weeping bitterly. Madeleine had forgotten her presence.

Prosper on entering the room was so amazed on finding himself in the presence of Madeleine, that he noticed nothing else. With a feeling of surprise, he turned and looked at the weeping woman. He was not mistaken; this neatly dressed waiting-maid was Nina Gipsy.

Prosper was so startled that he became perfectly dumb. He stood there with ashy lips, and a chilly sensation creeping through his veins. He was terrified at the position in which he found himself. He was there, between the two women who had ruled his fate; between Madeleine, the proud heiress who spurned his love, and Nina Gipsy, the poor girl whose devotion to him he had so disdainfully rejected. And she had heard all! Poor Nina had heard the passionate avowal of her lover, had heard him swear that he could never love any woman but Madeleine, that if his love were not reciprocated he would kill himself, as he had nothing else to live for.

Prosper could judge of her sufferings by his own. For she was wounded not only in the present, but in the past. What must be her humiliation and anger on hearing the miserable part which he, in his disappointed love, had imposed upon her? He was astonished that Nina—violence itself—remained silently weeping, instead of rising and bitterly denouncing him.

Meanwhile Madeleine had succeeded in recovering her usual calmness. Slowly and almost unconsciously she had put on her bonnet and mantle, which were lying on the sofa. Then she approached Prosper, and said: "Why did you come here? We both have need of all the courage we can command. You are unhappy, Prosper: I am more than unhappy, I am most wretched. You have a right to complain: I have not the right to shed a tear. While my heart is slowly breaking, I must wear a smiling face. You can seek consolation in the bosom of a friend: I can have no confidant but God."

Prosper tried to murmur a reply, but his pale lips refused to articulate; he was stifling. "I wish to tell you," continued Madeleine, "that I have forgotten nothing. But oh! let not this knowledge give you any hope: the future is blank for us; but if you love me you will live. You will not, I know, add to my already heavy burden of sorrow the agony of mourning your death. For my sake, live; live the life of a good man, and perhaps the day will come when I can justify myself in your eyes. And now, O my brother, O my only friend, adieu! adieu!" She pressed a kiss upon his brow, and rushed from the room, followed by Nina Gipsy!

Prosper was alone. He seemed to be awaking from a troubled dream. He tried to think over what had just happened, and asked himself if he were losing his mind, or whether he had really spoken to Madeleine and seen Nina? He was obliged to attribute all this to the mysterious power of the strange man whom he had seen for the first time that very morning. How did this individual gain his wonderful power of controlling events to suit his own purposes? He seemed to anticipate everything, to know everything. He was acquainted with Cavaillon, he knew all Madeleine's movements; he had made even Nina become humble and submissive.

While thinking over this, Prosper had reached such a degree of exasperation, that when M. Verduret entered the little parlour, he strode towards him white with rage, and in a threatening voice, exclaimed:

"Who are you?"

The stout man did not manifest any surprise at this burst of anger, but quietly answered: "A friend of your father's; did you not know it?"

"That sir, is no answer; I have been surprised into being influenced by a stranger, but now—"

"Do you want my biography—what I have been, what I am, and what I may be? What difference does it make to you? I told you that I would save you; the main point is that I am saving you."

"Still I have the right to ask by what means you are saving me."

"What good will it do you to know what my plans are?"

"In order to decide whether I will accept or reject them."

"But suppose I guarantee success?"

"That is not sufficient. I do not choose to be any longer deprived of my own free will—to be exposed, without warning, to trials like those I have undergone to-day. A man of my age must know what he is doing."

"A man of your age, Prosper, when he is blind, takes a guide, and does not undertake to point out the way to his leader."

The half-bantering, half commiserating tone of M. Verduret was not calculated to calm Prosper's irritation.

"That being the case, sir," he exclaimed, "I will thank you for your past services, and decline them for the future, as I have no need of them. If I attempted to defend my honour and my life, it was because I hoped that Madeleine would be restored to me. I have been convinced to-day that all is at an end between us; I retire from the struggle, and care not what becomes of me now."

Prosper was so decided, that M. Verduret seemed alarmed. "You must be mad," he firmly said.

"No, unfortunately I am not. Madeleine has ceased to love me, and of what importance is anything else?"

His heartbroken tone aroused M. Verduret's sympathy, and he said in a kind, soothing voice—"Then you suspect nothing? You did not fathom the meaning of what she said?"

"You were listening?" cried Prosper fiercely.

"I certainly was."

"Sir!"

"Yes. It was a presumptuous thing to do, perhaps; but the end justified the means in this instance. I am glad I did listen, because it enables me to say to you: Take courage, Prosper; Mademoiselle Madeleine loves you—she has never ceased to love you."

Like a dying man who eagerly listens to deceitful promises of recovery, although he feels himself sinking into the grave, Prosper felt his sad heart cheered by M. Verduret's assertion. "Oh," he murmured, suddenly calmed, "if I only could hope!"

"Rely upon me, I am not mistaken. Ah, I could see the torture endured by this generous girl, while she struggled between her love and what she believed to be her duty. Were you not convinced of her love when she bade you farewell?"

"She loves me, she is free, and yet she shuns me."

"No, she is not free! In breaking off her engagement with you, she was governed by some powerful, irrepressible event. She is sacrificing herself—for whom? We shall soon know; and the secret of her self-sacrifice will reveal to us the secret of the plot against you."

As M. Verduret spoke, Prosper felt his resolutions of revolt slowly melting away, and their place occupied by confidence and hope. "If what you say were only true!" he mournfully said.

"Foolish young man! Why do you persist in obstinately shutting your eyes to the proof I place before you? Can you not see that Mademoiselle Madeleine knows who the thief is? Yes, you need not look so shocked; she knows the thief, but no human power can tear it from her. She sacrifices you, but then she almost has the right, since she first sacrificed herself."

Prosper was almost convinced; and it nearly broke his heart to leave the little apartment where he had seen Madeleine. "Alas!" he said, pressing M. Verduret's hand, "you must think me a ridiculous fool! but you don't know how I suffer."

The man with the red whiskers sadly shook his head, and his voice sounded very unsteady, as he replied in a low tone: "What you suffer, I have suffered. Like you, I loved, not a pure, noble girl, yet a girl fair to look upon. For three years I was at her feet, a slave to her every whim, when, one day, she suddenly deserted me who adored her, to throw herself

into the arms of a man who despised her. Then, like you, I wished to die. Neither threats nor entreaties could induce her to return to me. Passion never reasons, and she loved my rival."

"And did you know who this rival was?"

"Yes, I knew."

"And you did not seek revenge?"

"No," replied M. Verduret. And with a singular expression he added : "For fate charged itself with my vengeance."

For a minute Prosper was silent ; then he said : "I have finally decided. My honour is a sacred trust for which I must account to my family. I am ready to follow you to the end of the world ; dispose of me as you judge proper."

That same day Prosper, faithful to his promise, sold his furniture, and wrote to his friends announcing his intended departure for San Francisco. In the evening he and M. Verduret installed themselves at the hotel of the Grand Archangel.

Madame Alexandre gave Prosper her prettiest room, but it was very ugly compared with the coquettish little drawing-room in the Rue Chaptal. His state of mind did not permit him, however, to notice the difference between his former and present quarters. He lay on an old sofa, meditating upon the events of the day, and feeling a bitter satisfaction in his isolated condition. About eleven o'clock he thought he would open the window, and let the cool air fan his burning brow ; as he did so, a piece of paper was blown from among the folds of the window-curtain and lay at his feet on the floor.

Prosper mechanically picked it up, and looked at it. It was covered with writing, the handwriting of Nina Gipsy ; he could not be mistaken about that. It was the fragment of a torn letter ; and if the half sentences did not convey any clear meaning, they were sufficient to lead the mind into all sorts of conjectures.

The fragment read as follows :—

"of M. Raoul, I have been very im . . . plotted against him, of whom never . . . warn Prosper, and then . . . best friend, he . . . hand of Mademoiselle Ma . . ."

Prosper never closed his eyes during that night.

IX.

Not far from the Palais Royal, in the Rue St. Honoré, is the sign of "La Bonne Foi," a small establishment, half café and half fruiterer's shop, much frequented by the work-people of the neighbourhood.

It was in this modest café that Prosper, the day after his release, awaited M. Verduret, who had promised to meet him at four o'clock. Just as the clock struck the hour, M. Verduret, who was punctuality itself, appeared. He was more red-faced and self-satisfied, if possible, than on the day before. As soon as the waiter, of whom he ordered a glass of beer, had left them, M. Verduret said to Prosper : "Well, are all our commissions executed?"

"Yes, every one."

"Have you seen the costumier?"

"I gave him your letter, and everything you ordered will be sent to the Grand Archangel to-morrow."

"Very good ; you have not lost time, neither have I. I have a lot of news for you."

The "Bonne Foi" is almost deserted at four o'clock. The hour for coffee is passed, and the hour for absinthe has not yet come. M. Verduret and Prosper could therefore talk at their ease without fear of being overheard by listening neighbours. The former drew forth his precious diary which, like the enchanted book in the fairy-tale, had an answer for every question. "While awaiting our emissaries whom I appointed to meet me here," said he, "let us devote a little time to M. de Lagors."

At this name Prosper did not protest, as he had done the previous day. Like those imperceptible insects which, having once penetrated the root of a tree devour it in a single night, suspicion, when it invades our minds, soon develops itself and destroys our firmest beliefs. De Lagors's visit, and the fragment of Gipsy's letter, had filled Prosper with suspicions which had grown stronger and more settled as time went on.

"Do you know, my dear friend," asked M. Verduret, "what part of France this devoted friend of yours comes from?"

"He was born at St. Remy, which is also Madame Fauvel's native town."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Oh, perfectly! He has not only often told me so, but I have heard him tell M. Fauvel; and he would talk to Madame Fauvel by the hour about his mother, who was cousin to Madame Fauvel, and dearly beloved by her."

"Then you think there is no possible doubt or error about this part of his story?"

"None in the least."

"Well, things are assuming a queer appearance," said M. Verduret. And he began to whistle between his teeth; which, with him, was a sign of intense, inward satisfaction.

"What do you refer to?" inquired Prosper.

"To what I have just discovered—to what I have all along expected. Good people!" he exclaimed, imitating the manner of a showman at a fair, "it is a lovely town, St. Remy, with six thousand inhabitants, charming boulevards on the site of the old fortifications, handsome town hall, numerous fountains, large charcoal market, silk factories, famous hospital, and so on."

Prosper was on thorns. "Please be so good," said he, "as to explain what you—"

"It also contains," continued M. Verduret, "a Roman triumphal arch, which is of unparalleled beauty, and a Greek mausoleum; but no De Lagors. St. Remy is the native town of Nostradamus, but not of your friend."

"Yet I have had proofs."

"Naturally. But proofs can be fabricated; relatives can be improvised. Your evidence is open to suspicion. My information is undeniable, perfectly authenticated. While you were pining in prison, I was preparing my batteries, and collecting ammunition to open fire. I wrote to St. Remy, and received answers to my questions."

"Will you not let me know what they were?"

"Have patience," said M. Verduret as he turned over the leaves of his diary. "Ah, here is number one. Bow to it respectfully, 'tis official." He then read:

"DE LAGORS.—Very old family, originally from Maillane, settled at St. Remy about a century ago—"

"I told you so," cried Prosper.

"Pray allow me to finish," said M. Verduret.

"The last of the De Lagors (Jules-René-Henri) bearing without clear

authority the title of count, married in 1829 Mademoiselle Rosalie-Clarisse Fontanet, of Tarascon; died December 1848 leaving two daughters, but no male issue. The town registers make no mention of any person in the district bearing the name of De Lagors.”

“Now what do you think of this information?” asked the stout man with a triumphant smile.

Prosper was astounded. “But why, then, does M. Fauvel treat Raoul as his nephew?” he asked.

“Ah, you mean as his wife’s nephew! Let us examine note number two: it is not official, but it throws a valuable light upon your friend’s income of twenty thousand francs.

“Jules-René-Henri de Lagors, last of his name, died at St. Remy on the 29th of December, 1848, in a state verging on poverty. He at one time was possessed of a moderate fortune, but invested it in a nursery for silk-worms, and lost it all.

“He had no son, but left two daughters, one of whom is a teacher at Aix, and the other married to a small tradesman at Orgon. His widow, who lives at Montagnette, is supported entirely by one of her relatives, the wife of a rich banker in Paris. No person of the name of De Lagors lives in the district of Arles.”

“That is all,” said M. Verduret; “do you think it enough?”

“Really, sir, I don’t know whether I am awake or dreaming.”

“You will be awake after a while. Now, I wish to mention one thing. Some people may assert that the widow of De Lagors had a child born after her husband’s death. This objection is destroyed by the age of your friend. Raoul is twenty-four, and M. de Lagors has not been dead twenty years.”

“But,” observed Prosper, thoughtfully, “who then can Raoul be?”

“I don’t know. The fact is, I am more perplexed to find out who he is than to know who he is not. There is one man who could give us all the information we seek, but he will take good care to keep his mouth shut.”

“You mean M. de Clameran?”

“Him, and no one else.”

“I have always felt the most inexplicable aversion towards him. Ah, if we could only get an account of his life!”

“I have been furnished with a few notes concerning the De Clameran family by your father, who knew them well; they are brief, but I expect more.”

“What did my father tell you?”

“Nothing favourable, you may be sure. I will read you the synopsis of his information:

“Louis de Clameran was born at the Château de Clameran, near Tarascon. He had an elder brother named Gaston, who, in consequence of an affray in which he had the misfortune to kill a man and badly wound another, was compelled to fly the country in 1842. Gaston was an honest, noble youth, universally beloved. Louis, on the contrary, was a wicked, despicable fellow, detested by all who knew him.

“Upon the death of his father, Louis came to Paris, and in less than two years had squandered not only his own patrimony, but also the share of his exiled brother. Ruined and harassed by debt, Louis entered the army, but behaved so disgracefully that he was constantly being punished. After leaving the army we lose sight of him; all that is known is, that he went to England, and thence to a German gambling resort, where he became notorious for his scandalous conduct.

“In 1865 we find him again in Paris. He was in great poverty, and

his associates were among the most depraved classes. But he suddenly heard of the return of his brother Gaston to France. Gaston had made a fortune in Mexico; but being still a young man, and accustomed to a very active life, he purchased near Oloron an iron foundry, intending to spend the remainder of his life in working it. Six months ago he died in the arms of his brother Louis. His death provided our De Clameran with an immense fortune, and the title of marquis."

"Then," said Prosper, "from all this I judge that M. de Clameran was very poor when I met him for the first time at M. Fauvel's?"

"Evidently."

"And shortly afterwards De Lagors arrived from the country?"

"Precisely."

"And about a month after his appearance, Madeleine suddenly dismissed me?"

"Good," exclaimed M. Verduret, "I am glad you are beginning to understand the state of affairs." He was here interrupted by the entrance of a stranger. The new-comer was a dandified-looking coachman, with elegant black whiskers, shining boots with light tops, a yellow cap, and a red and black striped waistcoat. After cautiously looking round the room, he walked straight up to the table where M. Verduret sat.

"What is the news, Master Joseph Dubois?" asked the stout man eagerly.

"Ah, my chief, don't ask me!" answered the man. "Things are getting warm, very warm."

Prosper concentrated all his attention upon this superb servant. He thought he recognised his face. He had certainly somewhere seen that retreating forehead and those little restless black eyes, but where and when he could not remember. Meanwhile Master Joseph had taken a seat at a table adjoining the one occupied by M. Verduret and Prosper; and, having called for some absinthe, was preparing it by holding the water aloft and slowly dropping it into the glass.

"What have you to tell me?" enquired M. Verduret.

"In the first place, my chief, I must say that the position of valet and coachman to M. de Clameran is by no means a bed of roses."

"Go on; come to the point. You can complain to-morrow."

"Very good. Yesterday my master walked out at two o'clock. I, of course, followed him. Do you know where he went? The thing was as good as a farce. He went to the Grand Archangel to see Madame Nina Gipsy."

"Well, make haste. They told him she was gone. What then?"

"What then? Ah! he was not at all pleased, I can tell you. He hurried back to the hotel where the other, M. de Lagors, awaited him. He swore like a trooper, and M. Raoul asked him what had happened to put him in such a bad humour. 'Nothing,' replied my master, 'except that the little devil has run off, and no one knows where she is; she has slipped through our fingers.' Then they both appeared to be vexed and uneasy. De Lagors asked if she knew anything serious. 'She knows nothing but what I told you,' replied De Clameran; 'but this nothing, falling into the ear of a man with any suspicions, will be more than enough to work on.'"

M. Verduret smiled like a man who had his reasons for appreciating at their just value De Clameran's fears. "Well, your master is not without sense after all," said he; "don't you think he showed it by saying that?"

"Yes, my chief. Then De Lagors exclaimed: 'If it is as serious as that,

we must get rid of the little beggar !' But my master shrugged his shoulders, and laughing loudly said : ' You talk like an idiot ; when one is annoyed by a woman of this sort, one must take measures to get rid of her administratively.' This idea seemed to amuse them both very much."

"I can understand their being entertained by it," said M. Verduret ; "it is an excellent idea ; but the misfortune is, it is too late to carry it out. The nothing which made De Clameran uneasy has already fallen into a knowing ear."

With breathless curiosity, Prosper listened to this report, every word of which seemed to throw light upon past events. Now, he thought, he understood the fragment of Gipsy's letter. He saw that this Raoul, in whom he had confided so deeply, was nothing better than a scoundrel. A thousand little circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now recurred to his mind, and made him wonder how he could have remained blind so long.

Master Joseph Dubois continued his report, —

"Yesterday, after dinner, my master decked himself out like a bridegroom. I shaved him, curled his hair, and perfumed him with especial care, after which I drove him to the Rue de Provence to call on Madame Fauvel."

"What !" exclaimed Prosper, "after the insulting language he used the day of the robbery, did he dare to visit the house ?"

"Yes, my young gentleman ; he not only dared this, but he also stayed there until nearly midnight, to my great discomfort ; for I got thoroughly drenched while waiting for him."

"How did he look when he came out ?" asked M. Verduret.

"Well, he certainly looked less pleased than when he went in. After putting up my carriage, and rubbing down my horse, I went to see if he wanted anything ; I found the door locked, and he abused me without stint through the keyhole."

And to assist the digestion of this insult, Master Joseph here gulped down a mouthful of absinthe.

"Is that all ?" questioned M. Verduret.

"All that occurred yesterday, my chief ; but this morning my master rose late, still in a horribly bad humour. At noon Raoul arrived, also in a rage. They at once began to dispute, and there was such a row ! Why, the most abandoned thieves would have blushed at their foul language. At one time my master seized the other by the throat and shook him like a reed. But Raoul was too quick for him, and saved himself from strangulation by drawing out a sharp-pointed knife, the sight of which made my master drop him in a hurry, I can tell you."

"But what was it that they said ?"

"Ah, there is the rub, my chief," replied Joseph in a piteous tone ; "the scamps spoke English, so I could not understand them. But I am sure they were disputing about money."

"How do you know that ?"

"Because in view of the Exhibition I learned the word money in every language, and it constantly recurred in their conversation."

M. Verduret sat with knit brows, talking in an undertone to himself ; and Prosper, who was watching him, wondered if he was trying to divine the subject of the dispute by the mere force of reflection.

"When they had done fighting," continued Joseph, "the rascals began to talk in French again ; but they only spoke of a fancy ball which is to be given by some banker. When Raoul was leaving, my master said, 'Since

this thing is inevitable, and must take place to-day, you had better remain at home, at Vésinet, this evening." Raoul replied, "Of course."

Evening was approaching, and the café was gradually filling with customers, who were altogether calling for either absinthe or bitters. The waiters, mounting on stools, lit the gas burners placed round the room. "It is time to go," said M. Verduret to Joseph, "your master may want you; besides, here is some one come for me. I will see you to-morrow."

The new-comer was no other than Cavaillon, more troubled and frightened than ever. He looked uneasily around, as if he expected a posse of policemen to make their appearance, and carry him off to prison. He did not sit down at M. Verduret's table, but stealthily gave his hand to Prosper, and, after assuring himself that no one was observing them, handed M. Verduret a parcel, saying: "She found this in a cupboard."

It was a handsomely bound prayer-book. M. Verduret rapidly turned over the leaves, and soon found the pages from which the words pasted on Prosper's letter had been cut. "I had moral proofs," he said, handing the book to Prosper, "but here is material proof sufficient in itself to save you."

When Prosper looked at the book, he turned as pale as a ghost. He recognised it instantly. He had given it to Madeleine in exchange for the relic. He opened it, and on the fly-leaf Madeleine had written, "Souvenir of Notre Dame de Fourvières, 17th January, 1866." "This book belongs to Madeleine," he cried.

M. Verduret did not reply, but walked towards a young man dressed like a wine cooper, who had just entered the café. Glancing at a note which this person handed to him, he hastened back to the table, and said in an agitated voice: "I think we have got them now!"

Throwing a five-franc piece on the table, and without saying a word to Cavaillon, M. Verduret seized Prosper's arm, and hurried from the room. "What a fatality!" he said, as he hastened along the street: "we may perhaps miss them. We shall certainly reach the St. Lazare station too late for the St. Germain train."

"For heaven's sake, where are you going?" asked Prosper.

"Never mind, we can talk after we start. Hurry!"

On arriving at the Place du Palais Royal, M. Verduret stopped in front of one of the cabs stationed there, and examined the horses at a glance. "How much will you want for driving us to Vésinet?" he asked of the driver.

"I don't know the road very well," replied the cabman.

The name of Vésinet was enough for Prosper. "I will point out the road," he quickly said.

"Well," said the driver, at this time of night, in such dreadful weather, it ought to be—twenty-five francs—"

"And to drive very fast?"

"Bless my soul! Why, I leave that to you honour's generosity; but if you put it at thirty-five francs—"

"You shall have a hundred," interrupted M. Verduret, "if you overtake a vehicle which has half an hour's start of us."

"By Jingo!" cried the delighted driver; "jump in quick: we are losing time!" And whipping up his lean horses, he galloped them down the Rue de Valois at a fearful speed.

X.

ON leaving the little station of Vésinet, we come upon two roads. One, to the left, macadamized and kept in perfect repair, leads to the village, and along it glimpses are here and there obtained of the new church through the openings between the trees. The other road, newly laid out and scarcely levelled, leads through the woods. Along the latter, which before the lapse of five years will be a busy street, are a few houses, tasteless in design, rising here and there out of the foliage: rural retreats of Paris tradesmen, occupied only during the summer.

It was at the junction of these two roads that Prosper stopped the cab. The driver had gained his hundred francs. The horses were completely worn out, but they had accomplished all that was expected of them; M. Verduret could distinguish the lamps of another cab, about fifty yards ahead of him.

M. Verduret jumped out, and handing the driver a hundred-franc note, said: "Here is what I promised you. Go to the first tavern on the right-hand side of the road as you enter the village. If we do not meet you there in an hour, you will be at liberty to return to Paris."

The driver was overwhelming in his thanks; but neither Prosper nor his friend heard them. They had already started along the new road. The weather, which had been inclement when they set out, was now fearful. The rain fell in torrents, and a furious wind howled dismally through the woods. The intense darkness was rendered more dreary by the occasional glimmer of the lamps of the distant railway station, and which seemed about to be extinguished by every fresh gust of wind.

M. Verduret and Prosper had been running along the muddy road for about five minutes, when suddenly the latter stopped and said: "This is Raoul's house."

Before the iron gate of an isolated house was the cab which M. Verduret had followed. In spite of the pouring rain, the driver, wrapped in a thick cloak, and leaning back on his seat, was already fast asleep, while waiting for the person whom he had brought to the house a few minutes ago.

M. Verduret pulled his cloak, and said, in a low voice: "Wake up, my good man."

The driver started, and mechanically gathering up his reins, yawned out: "I am ready; jump in!" But when, by the light of his lamps, he caught sight of two men in this lonely spot, he concluded they meant to rob him, and perhaps to take his life. "I am engaged!" he cried out, as he shook his whip; "I am waiting here for some one."

"I know that, you fool," replied M. Verduret, "and only wish to ask you a question, which you can gain five francs by answering. Did you not bring a middle-aged lady here?"

This question, with the promise of five francs, far from re-assuring the cabman, only increased his alarm. "I have already told you I am waiting for some one," he said; "and if you don't go away and leave me alone, I will call out for help."

M. Verduret drew back quickly. "Come away," he whispered to Prosper, "the fool will do as he says; and the alarm once given, farewell to our projects. We must find some other entrance than by the gate."

They then went along the wall surrounding the garden, in search of a place where it was possible to scale it. This was difficult to discover, the wall being twelve feet high, and the night very dark. Fortunately, M. Verduret was very agile; and, having decided upon the spot to be scaled, he drew back a few paces, and making a sudden spring, seized hold of one of the projecting stones on the top, then drawing himself up by the aid of his hands and feet, soon found himself astride the wall.

It was now Prosper's turn to climb up; but, though much younger than his companion, he had not his agility and strength, and would never have succeeded if M. Verduret had not pulled him up, and then helped him down on the other side.

Once in the garden, M. Verduret looked about him to study the situation. The house occupied by M. de Lagors stood in the middle of a large garden. It was narrow, two stories high, and had attics. In only one window, on the second storey, was there any light.

"As you have often been here," said M. Verduret, "you must know all about the arrangement of the house: what room is that where we see the light?"

"That is Raoul's bed-chamber."

"Very good. What rooms are on the ground floor?"

"The kitchen, pantry, billiard-room, and dining-room."

"And on the floor above?"

"Two drawing-rooms, separated by folding doors, and a study."

"Where do the servants sleep?"

"Raoul has none at present. He is waited on by a man and his wife, who live at Vésinet; they come in the morning, and leave after dinner."

M. Verduret rubbed his hands gleefully. "That suits our plans exactly," he said; "it will be strange if we do not hear what Raoul has to say to this person who has come from Paris at this time of night to see him. Let us go in."

Prosper seemed averse to this, and said: "That would be a serious thing for us to do."

"Bless my soul! what else did we come here for?" exclaimed M. Verduret. "Did you think ours was a pleasure trip, merely to enjoy this lovely weather?" continued he in a bantering tone.

"But we might be discovered."

"Suppose we are? If the least noise betrays our presence, you have only to advance boldly as a friend come to visit a friend, and who, finding the door open, walked in."

But unfortunately the heavy oak door was locked. M. Verduret shook it in vain. "How foolish!" he said with vexation, "I ought to have brought my instruments with me. A common lock which could be opened with a nail, and I have not even a piece of wire!" Seeing it useless to attempt the door, he tried successively every window on the ground floor. Alas! each shutter was securely fastened on the inside.

M. Verduret was provoked. He prowled round the house like a fox round a henroost, seeking an entrance, but finding none. Despairingly he came back to the spot in front of the house, whence he had the best view of the lighted window. "If I could only look in," he said. "To think that in there," and he pointed to the window, "is the solution of the mystery; and we are cut off from it by thirty feet or so of wall!"

Prosper was more surprised than ever at his companion's strange behaviour. The latter seemed perfectly at home in this garden, and ran about it with-

out any precaution. One would have supposed him accustomed to such expeditions, especially when he spoke of picking the lock of an occupied house, as coolly as though he were talking of opening a snuff-box. He was utterly indifferent to the rain and sleet driven in his face by the gusts of wind as he splashed about in the mud trying to find some means of entrance. "I must get a peep into that window," he said, "and I will certainly do so, cost what it may !"

Prosper seemed to suddenly remember something. "There is a ladder here," he remarked in an undertone.

"Why did you not tell me that before? Where is it?"

"At the end of the garden, under the trees."

They ran to the spot, and in a few minutes the ladder was standing against the house. But to their annoyance they found it five feet too short. Five long feet of wall between the top of the ladder and the lighted window was a discouraging sight to Prosper, who exclaimed: "We cannot reach it."

"We can reach it," cried M. Verduret triumphantly. And quickly seizing the ladder, he cautiously raised it, and rested the bottom round on his shoulders, holding, at the same time, the two uprights firmly and steadily with his hands. The obstacle was overcome. "Now mount," he said to his companion.

Prosper did not hesitate. Enthusiasm at seeing difficulties so skilfully conquered, and the hope of triumph, gave him a strength and agility which he had never imagined he possessed. He climbed up gently till he reached the lower rounds, then quickly mounted the ladder, which swayed and trembled beneath his weight.

But he had scarcely looked in at the lighted window when he uttered a cry, which was drowned in the roaring tempest, and sliding part way down the ladder, he dropped like a log on the wet grass, exclaiming: "The villain! the villain!"

With wonderful promptitude and vigour M. Verduret laid the ladder on the ground, and ran towards Prosper, fearing he was dangerously injured.

"Are you hurt? What did you see?" he asked.

But Prosper had already risen. Although he had had a violent fall, he felt nothing; he was in that state when mind governs matter so absolutely that the body is insensible to pain. "I saw," he answered in a hoarse voice, "I saw Madeleine—do you understand, Madeleine—in that room, alone with Raoul."

M. Verduret was confounded. Was it possible that he, the infallible expert, had been mistaken in his deductions?

He well knew that M. de Lagors's visitor was a woman; but his own conjectures, and the note which Madame Gipsy had sent to him at the café, had caused him to believe that this woman was Madame Fauvel.

"You must be mistaken," he said to Prosper.

"No, sir, no. Never could I mistake another for Madeleine. Ah! you who heard what she said to me yesterday, tell me: was I to have expected such infamous treason as this? You said to me then: 'She loves you, she loves you!' What do you think now? speak!"

M. Verduret did not answer. He had been completely bewildered by his mistake, and was now racking his brain to discover the cause of it, which was soon discerned by his penetrating mind.

"This is the secret discovered by Nina," continued Prosper. "Madeleine, this pure and noble Madeleine, whom I believed to be as immaculate as an angel, is the mistress of this thief, who has even stolen the name he

bears. And I, trusting fool that I was, made this scoundrel my best friend. I confided to him all my hopes and fears; and he was her lover! Of course they amused themselves by ridiculing my silly devotion and blind confidence!"

He stopped, overcome by his violent emotions. Wounded vanity is the worst of miseries. The certainty of having been so shamefully deceived and betrayed made Prosper almost insane with rage. "This is the last humiliation I shall submit to," he fiercely cried. "It shall not be said that I was coward enough to let an insult like this go unpunished."

He started towards the house; but M. Verduret seized his arm, and said: "What are you going to do?"

"To have my revenge! I will break down the door; what do I care for the noise and scandal, now that I have nothing to lose? I shall not attempt to creep into the house like a thief, but as a master—as one who has a right to enter; as a man who, having received a deadly insult, comes to demand satisfaction."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Prosper."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will!"

"You do not hope that you will be able to deter me. I will appear before them, put them to the blush, kill them both, and then put an end to my own wretched existence. That is what I intend to do, and nothing shall hinder me!"

If M. Verduret had not held Prosper with a vice-like grip, he would have escaped, and attempted to carry out his threat. "If you make any noise, Prosper, or raise an alarm, all your hopes are ruined," said M. Verduret.

"I have no hopes now."

"Raoul, put on his guard, will escape us, and you will remain dishonoured for ever."

"What is that to me?"

"It is everything to me. I have sworn to prove your innocence. A man of your age can easily find a wife, but can never restore lustre to a tarnished name. Let nothing interfere with the establishing of your innocence."

Genuine passion is uninfluenced by surrounding circumstances. M. Verduret and Prosper stood foot-deep in mud, wet to the skin with the rain pouring down on their heads, and yet still continued their dispute. "I will be avenged," repeated Prosper, with the persistency of a fixed idea; "I will be avenged."

"Well, avenge yourself then like a man, and not like a child!" said M. Verduret angrily.

"Sir!"

"Yes, I repeat it, like a child. What will you do after you get into the house? Have you any arms? No. You rush upon Raoul, and a struggle ensues; and while you two are fighting, Madeleine jumps in the cab and drives off. What then? Which is the stronger, you or Raoul?"

Overcome by the sense of how powerless he was, Prosper remained silent. "And of what use would arms be?" continued M. Verduret. "It would be the height of folly to shoot a man whom you can send to the galleys."

"What then shall I do?"

"Wait. Vengeance is a delicious fruit, which must be allowed to ripen in order that it may be fully enjoyed."

Prosper was unsettled in his resolution; M. Verduret, seeing this, ad-

vanced his last and strongest argument. "How do we know," he said, "that Mademoiselle Madeleine is here on her own account? Did we not come to the conclusion that she was sacrificing herself for the benefit of some one else? That superior will which compelled her to banish you may have constrained this step to-night."

Whatever coincides with our secret wishes is always eagerly welcomed, and this apparently improbable supposition struck Prosper as being possibly correct.

"That might be the case," he murmured, "who knows?"

"I would soon know," said M. Verduret, "if I could only see them together in that room."

"Will you promise me, sir, to tell me the truth, exactly what you yourself think, no matter how painful it may be for me?"

"I swear it, upon my word of honour."

At these words Prosper, with a strength which a few minutes before he would not have believed himself possessed of, raised the ladder, placed the last round on his shoulders, and said to M. Verduret: "Mount!"

M. Verduret rapidly ascended the ladder, scarcely shaking it, and soon had his head on a level with the window. Prosper had seen but too well. There was Madeleine, at this hour of the night, alone with Raoul de Lagors in his bed-chamber!

M. Verduret noticed that she still wore her bonnet and mantle. She was standing in the middle of the room, talking with great animation. Her look and gestures betrayed indignant scorn. There was an expression of ill-disguised loathing upon her beautiful face. Raoul was seated in a low chair by the fire, stirring up the embers with a pair of tongs. Every now and then he would shrug his shoulders, like a man resigned to everything he heard, and had no answer to make beyond, "I cannot help it. I can do nothing for you."

M. Verduret would willingly have given the handsome ring on his finger to be able to hear what was being said; but the roaring wind completely drowned the voices of the speakers, and he dared not place his ear close to the window for fear of being perceived. "They are evidently quarrelling," he thought; "but it is certainly not a lovers' quarrel."

Madeleine continued talking; and it was by closely watching Raoul's face, clearly revealed by the lamp on the chimney-piece, that M. Verduret hoped to discover the meaning of the scene before him. Now and again De Lagors would start and tremble in spite of his pretended indifference; or else he would strike at the fire with the tongs, as if giving vent to his rage at some reproach uttered by Madeleine. Finally, Madeleine changed her threats into entreaties, and, clasping her hands, almost fell on her knees. Raoul turned away his head, and refused to answer save in monosyllables.

Several times she was about to leave the room, but each time returned, as if asking a favour, and unable to make up her mind to quit the house till she had obtained it. At last she seemed to have uttered something decisive; for Raoul quickly rose and took from a desk near the fireplace a bundle of papers, which he handed to her.

"Well," thought M. Verduret, "this looks bad. Can it be a compromising correspondence which the young lady wants to secure!"

Madeleine took the papers, but was apparently still dissatisfied. She seemed to entreat Raoul to give her something else, but he refused; and she then threw the papers on the table. These papers puzzled M. Verduret

very much, as he gazed at them through the window. "I am not blind," he said, "and I certainly am not mistaken; those red, green, and gray papers, are evidently pawn tickets!"

Madeleine turned over the papers as if looking for some particular ones. She selected three, which she put in her pocket, disdainfully pushing the others aside. She was now evidently preparing to take her departure, and said a few words to Raoul, who took up the lamp as if to escort her down stairs.

There was nothing more for M. Verduret to see. He carefully descended the ladder, muttering to himself: "Pawn tickets! What infamous mystery lies at the bottom of all this?" The first thing to be done was to hide the ladder. Raoul might take it into his head to look round the garden, when he came to the door with Madeleine, and if he did so the ladder could scarcely fail to attract his attention. M. Verduret and Prosper hastily laid it on the ground, regardless of the shrubs which they destroyed in doing so, and then concealed themselves among the trees, whence they could watch at once the front door and the outer gate.

Madeleine and Raoul appeared in the doorway. Raoul placed the lamp on the floor, and offered his hand to the girl; but she refused it with haughty contempt, which somewhat soothed Prosper's lacerated heart. This scornful behaviour did not, however, seem to surprise or hurt Raoul, who simply answered by an ironical gesture which implied, "As you please!" He followed Madeleine to the gate, which he opened and closed after her; then he hurried back to the house, while the cab drove rapidly away.

"Now," said Prosper, "you must tell me what you think. You promised to let me know the truth no matter how bitter it might be. Speak; I can bear it, be it what it may!"

"You will have only joy to bear, my friend. Within a month you will bitterly regret your suspicions of to-night. You will blush to think that you ever imagined Mademoiselle Madeleine to have been the mistress of a man like De Lagors."

"But, sir, appearances—"

"It is precisely against appearances that we must be on our guard. Always distrust them. A suspicion, false or just, is necessarily based on something. But we must not stay here for ever; and as Raoul has fastened the gate, we shall have to climb over the wall."

"But there is the ladder."

"Let it stay where it is; as we cannot efface our footprints, he will think thieves have been trying to get into the house." They scaled the wall, and had not walked fifty steps when they heard the noise of a gate being unlocked. They stood aside and waited; a man soon passed by on his way to the station.

"That is Raoul," said M. Verduret, "and Joseph will report to us that he has been to tell De Clameran what has just taken place. If they are only kind enough to speak French!" M. Verduret walked along quietly for some time, trying to connect the broken chain of his deductions. "Why the deuce," he abruptly asked, "did this Raoul, who is devoted to gay society, come to choose a lonely country house like this to live in?"

"I suppose it was because M. Fauvel's villa is only fifteen minutes' ride from here, on the banks of the Seine."

"That accounts for his staying here in the summer; but in winter?"

"Oh, in winter he has a room at the Hotel du Louvre, and all the year round keeps up an apartment in Paris."

This did not enlighten M. Verduret much; he hurried his pace. "I hope our driver has not gone," said he. "We cannot take the train which is about to start, as Raoul would see us at the station."

Although it was more than an hour since M. Verduret and Prosper left the cab, where the road turned off, they found it waiting for them in front of the tavern.

The driver being unable to resist the desire to change his bank note, had ordered supper, and finding the wine very good, he was in no hurry to leave.

While delighted at the idea of having a fare back to Paris, he could not refrain from remarking on M. Verduret and Prosper's altered appearance. "Well, you are in a strange state!" he exclaimed.

Prosper replied that they had been to see a friend, and losing their way, had fallen into a quagmire; as if there were such things in Vésinet wood.

"So, that's the way you got covered with mud, is it?" exclaimed the driver, who, though apparently contented with this explanation, strongly suspected that his two customers had been engaged in some nefarious transaction. This opinion seemed to be entertained by the people present, for they looked at Prosper's muddy clothes and then at each other in a knowing way.

But M. Verduret put an end to all further comment by saying: "Come on!"

"All right, your honour: get in while I settle my bill; I will be with you in a minute."

The drive back was silent and seemed interminably long. Prosper at first tried to draw his strange companion into conversation, but as he received nothing but monosyllables in reply, he held his peace for the rest of the journey. He was again beginning to feel irritated at the absolute empire exercised over him by this man. Physical discomfort was added to his other troubles. He was stiff and numb; every bone in him ached with the cold. Although mental endurance may be unlimited, bodily strength must in the end give way. A violent effort is always followed by reaction.

Lying back in a corner of the cab, with his feet upon the front seat, M. Verduret seemed to be enjoying a nap; yet he was never more wide awake. He was in a perplexed state of mind. This expedition which he had been confident would solve all his doubts, had only added mystery to mystery. His chain of evidence, which he thought so strongly linked, was completely broken. For him the facts remained the same, but circumstances had changed. He could not imagine what common motive, what moral or material complicity, what influences, existed to cause the four actors in his drama, Madame Fauvel, Madeleine, Raoul, and De Clameran, to have apparently the same object in view. He was seeking, in his fertile mind, that encyclopædia of craft and subtlety, for some combination which would throw light on the problem before him.

Midnight struck as they reached the Grand Archangel, and for the first time M. Verduret remembered that he had not dined. Fortunately Madame Alexandre was still up, and in the twinkling of an eye had improvised a tempting supper. It was more than attention, more than respect, that she showed her guest. Prosper observed that she gazed admiringly at M. Verduret all the while that he was eating.

"You will not see me during the day-time, to-morrow," said M. Verduret to Prosper, when he had risen to leave the room; "but I will be here

about this time at night. Perhaps I shall discover what I am seeking at Jandidiers' ball."

Prosper was almost dumb with astonishment. What! would M. Verduret venture to appear at a fancy dress ball given by the wealthiest and most fashionable bankers in Paris? This accounted for his sending to the costumier. "Then you are invited to this ball?" he presently asked.

The expressive eyes of M. Verduret sparkled with amusement. "Not yet," he said; "but I shall be."

Oh, the inconsistency of the human mind! Prosper was tormented by the most serious reflections. He looked sadly round his chamber, and as he thought of M. Verduret's projected pleasure at the ball, exclaimed: "Ah, how fortunate he is! To-morrow he will see Madeleine more lovely than ever."

XI.

ABOUT the middle of the Rue St. Lazare are the palatial residences of the brothers Jandidier, two celebrated financiers, who, if deprived of the prestige of immense wealth, would still be looked up to as remarkable men. Why cannot the same be said of all men?

These two mansions, which were regarded as marvels of magnificence at the time they were built, are entirely distinct from each other, but so planned as to form a single building when this is desired. When the brothers Jandidier give grand parties, they have the movable partitions taken away, and thus obtain the most superb suite of drawing-rooms in Paris. Princely magnificence, lavish hospitality, and an elegant, graceful manner of receiving their guests, make the entertainments given by the brothers eagerly sought after by the fashionable circles of the capital. On the Saturday, the Rue St. Lazare was blocked up by a file of carriages, whose fair occupants impatiently awaited their turn to alight. Dancing commenced at ten o'clock. The ball was a fancy dress one, and the majority of the costumes were superb; many were in the best taste, and some were truly original. Among the latter was that of a merry-andrew. Everything about the wearer was in perfect keeping: the insolent eye, coarse lips, inflamed cheek-bones, and a beard so red that it seemed to emit fire in the reflection of the dazzling lights.

He carried in his left hand a canvas banner, upon which were six or eight coarsely painted pictures, like those seen at country fairs. In his right he waved a little switch, with which he would every now and then strike his banner, after the fashion of a showman seeking to attract the attention of the crowd. A compact group gathered round him in the expectation of hearing some witty speeches; but he remained silent, near the door.

About half-past ten he quitted his post. M. and Madame Fauvel, followed by their niece Madeleine, had just entered. During the last ten days, the affair of the Rue de Provence had been the universal topic of conversation; and friends and enemies were alike glad to seize this opportunity of approaching the banker to tender their sympathy, or to offer equivocal condolence, which of all things is the most exasperating and insulting.

Belonging to the class of men of a serious turn, M. Fauvel had not assumed a fancy costume, but had merely thrown over his shoulders a short

silk cloak. On his arm leaned Madame Fauvel, *née* Valentine de La Verberie, bowing and gracefully greeting her numerous friends.

She had once been remarkably beautiful; and to-night, in the artificial light her very becoming dress seemed to have restored all her youthful freshness and comeliness. No one would have supposed her to be forty-eight years old. She wore a robe of embroidered satin and black velvet, of the later years of Louis the Fourteenth's reign, magnificent and severe, without the adornment of a single jewel. She looked elegant and grand in her court dress and her powdered hair, as became a La Verberie, so some ill-natured people remarked, who had made the mistake of marrying a man of money.

Madeleine, too, on her part was the object of universal admiration, so dazlingly beautiful and queen-like did she appear in her costume of maid of honour, which seemed to have been especially invented to set forth her beautiful figure. Her loveliness expanded in the perfumed atmosphere and dazling light of the ball-room. Never had her hair looked so brilliant a black, her complexion so exquisite, or her large eyes so sparkling. Having greeted their hosts, Madeleine took her aunt's arm, while M. Fauvel wandered about in search of the card-tables, the usual refuge of bored men, who find themselves enticed into a ball-room.

Dancing was now at its height. Two orchestras, led by Strauss and one of his lieutenants, filled the saloons with intoxicating sounds. The motley crowd whirled in the waltz, presenting a curious confusion of velvets, satins, laces, and diamonds. Almost every head and bosom sparkled with jewels; the palest cheeks became rosy; heavy eyes now shone like stars; and the glistening shoulders of fair women were like drifted snow in an April sun.

Forgotten by the crowd, the merry-andrew had taken refuge in the embrasure of a window, and seemed to be meditating upon the gay scene before him; at the same time, he kept his eyes upon a couple not far distant. It was Madeleine, leaning on the arm of a gorgeously attired doge, that attracted his gaze, and the doge was the Marquis de Clameran, who appeared radiant, rejuvenated, and whose attentions to his partner had an air of triumph. At an interval in the quadrille, he leaned over her and whispered compliments of unbounded admiration; and she seemed to listen, if not with pleasure, at least without repugnance. She now and then smiled, and coquettishly shrugged her shoulders.

"Evidently," muttered the merry-andrew, "this noble scoundrel is paying court to the banker's niece; so I was right yesterday. But how can Mademoiselle Madeleine resign herself so graciously to his insipid flattery? Fortunately, Prosper is not here now."

He was interrupted by an elderly man wrapped in a Venetian mantle, who said to him: "You remember, M. Verduret—" this name was uttered half seriously, half banteringly—"what you promised me?"

The merry-andrew bowed with great respect, but not the slightest shade of humility. "I remember," he replied.

"But do not be imprudent, I beg you."

"Monsieur the Count need not be uneasy; he has my promise."

"Very good. I know its value." The count walked off; but during this short colloquy the quadrille had ended, and M. de Clameran and Madeleine were lost to sight.

"I shall find them near Madame Fauvel," thought the merry-andrew. And he at once started in search of the banker's wife.

Incommoded by the stifling heat of the room, Madame Fauvel had sought a little fresh air in the grand picture-gallery, which, thanks to the talisman called gold, was now transformed into a fairy-like garden, filled with orange-trees, japonicas, oleanders, and white lilacs, the delicate bunches of which hung in graceful clusters. The merry-andrew saw her seated near the door of the card-room. Upon her right was Madeleine, and on her left stood Raoul de Lagors, dressed in a costume of the time of Henri III.

"I must confess," muttered the merry-andrew, from his post of observation, "that the young scamp is a handsome looking fellow.

Madeleine appeared very sad. She had plucked a camellia from a plant near by, and was mechanically pulling it to pieces as she sat with her eyes cast down. Raoul and Madame Fauvel were engaged in earnest conversation. Their faces seemed composed, but the gestures of the one and the trembling of the other betrayed that a serious discussion was taking place between them. In the card-room sat the doge, M. de Clameran, so placed as to have a full view of Madame Fauvel and Madeleine, although he was himself concealed by an angle of the apartment.

"It is the continuation of yesterday's scene," thought the merry-andrew. "If I could only get behind those camellias, I might hear what they are saying." He pushed his way through the crowd, but just as he had reached the desired spot, Madeleine rose, and taking the arm of a bejewelled Persian, walked away. At the same moment Raoul went into the card-room, and whispered a few words to De Clameran.

"There they go," muttered the merry andrew. "The pair of scoundrels certainly hold these poor women in their power; and it is in vain that they struggle to free themselves. What can be the secret of their influence?"

Suddenly a great commotion was caused in the picture-gallery, by the announcement of a wonderful minuet to be danced in the grand saloon; then by the arrival of the Countess de Commarin as Aurora; and finally, by the presence of the Princess Korasoff, with her superb suite of emeralds, reported to be the finest in the world. In an instant the gallery became almost deserted. Only a few forlorn-looking people remained; mostly sulky husbands, whose wives were dancing with partners they were jealous of, and some melancholy youths, looking awkward and unhappy in their gay fancy dresses. The merry-andrew thought the opportunity favourable for carrying out his designs. He abruptly left his corner, brandishing his banner, and tapping upon it with his switch, hammering affectedly all the time, as though about to speak. Having crossed the gallery, he placed himself between the chair occupied by Madame Fauvel and the door. As soon as the people left in the gallery had collected in a circle round him, he struck a comical attitude, and in a tone of great buffoonery proceeded to address them as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this very morning I obtained a license from the authorities of this city. And for what? Why, gentlemen, for the purpose of exhibiting to you a spectacle which has already excited the admiration of the four quarters of the globe, and of several other academies. Inside this booth, ladies, is about to commence the representation of a most unheard-of drama, acted for the first time at Peking, and translated by our most famous authors. Gentlemen, you can take your seats at once; the lamps are lighted, and the actors are dressing."

Here he stopped speaking, and imitated to perfection the screeching sounds which mountebanks educe from their musical instruments. "Now,

ladies and gentlemen," he resumed, "you will wish to know what I am doing here, if the piece is to be performed inside the booth. The fact is, gentlemen, that I intend to give you a foretaste of the agitations, sensations, emotions, palpitations, and other entertainments which you may enjoy for the small sum of ten sous. You see this superb picture? Well, it represents the eight most thrilling scenes in the drama. Ah, you begin to shudder already; and yet this is nothing compared to the play itself. This splendid picture gives you no more idea of the actual performance than a drop of water gives an idea of the sea, or a spark of fire of the sun. My picture, gentlemen, is merely a foretaste of what takes place inside, like the odours which emanate from the kitchens of a restaurant."

"Do you know the fellow?" asked an enormous Turk of a melancholy Punch.

"No, but he imitates a trumpet splendidly."

"Oh, very well indeed! But what is he driving at?"

He was endeavouring to attract the attention of Madame Fauvel, who, since Raoul and Madeleine had left her, had abandoned herself to a mournful reverie. He succeeded in his object. His shrill voice brought the banker's wife back to a sense of reality; she started and looked quickly about her, as if suddenly awakened; then she turned towards the merry-andrew.

He, however, continued: "Now, ladies, we are in China. The first of the eight pictures on my canvas, here, in the left hand corner,—here he touched the top daub,—represents the celebrated Mandarin Li-Fô, in the bosom of his family. The pretty young lady leaning over him is his wife; and the children playing on the carpet are the bonds of love between this happy pair. Do you not inhale the odour of contentment and happiness emanating from this admirable picture, gentlemen? Madame Li-Fô is the most virtuous of women, adoring her husband and idolizing her children. Being virtuous she is happy, for as the wise Confucius says, 'The ways of virtue are more pleasant than the ways of vice.'"

Madame Fauvel had quitted her seat, and taken another nearer to the speaker.

"Do you see anything on the banner like what he has been describing?" asked the melancholy Punch of his neighbour.

"No, nothing. Do you?"

The fact is, that the daubs of paint on the canvas represented nothing in particular, so that the merry-andrew could pretend they were anything he pleased.

"Picture No. 2!" he cried, after a flourish of music. "This old lady, seated before a mirror tearing out her hair,—especially the gray ones,—you have seen before; do you recognize her? No, you do not. Well, she is the fair mandarine of the first picture. I see the tears in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. Ah, you have cause to weep; for she is no longer virtuous, and her happiness has departed with her virtue. Alas, it is a sad tale! One fatal day she met in a street of Peking, a young ruffian, fiendish, but beautiful as an angel, and she loves him—the wretched woman loves him!"

The last words were uttered in the most tragic tone as he raised his clasped hands to heaven. During this tirade he had turned slightly round, so that he now found himself facing the banker's wife, whose countenance he closely watched while he was speaking.

"You are surprised, gentlemen," he continued; "I am not. The great

Bilboquet, my master, has proved to us that the heart never grows old, and that the most vigorous wall-flowers flourish on the oldest ruins. This unhappy woman is nearly fifty years old—fifty years old, and in love with a youth! Hence this heart-rending scene which should serve as a warning to us all."

"Really!" grumbled a cook dressed in white satin, who had passed the evening distributing bills of fare, which no one read, "I thought he would be more amusing."

"But," continued the merry-andrew, "you must go inside the booth to witness the effects of the mandarine's folly. At times a ray of reason penetrates her diseased brain, and then the sight of her anguish would soften a heart of stone. Enter, and for the small sum of ten sous you shall hear sobs such as the Odeon theatre never echoed in its halcyon days. The unhappy woman has waked up to the absurdity and inanity of her blind passion; she confesses to herself that she is madly pursuing a phantom. She knows but too well that he, in the vigour and beauty of youth, cannot love a faded old woman like herself, who vainly endeavours to retain the last traces of her once entrancing beauty. She feels that the sweet words he once whispered in her charmed ear were deceitful falsehoods. She knows that the day is near when she will be left alone, with nothing save his mantle in her hand."

As the merry-andrew addressed this voluble harangue to the crowd around him, he narrowly watched the countenance of the banker's wife. But nothing he had said seemed to affect her. She leaned back in her arm-chair perfectly calm, with the accustomed brightness in her eyes and an occasional smile upon her lips.

"Good heavens!" muttered the merry-andrew uneasily, "can I be on the wrong tack?" Pre-occupied however, as he was, he observed an addition to his circle of listeners in the person of M. de Clameran. "The third picture," said he, after imitating a roll of drums, "depicts the old mandarine after she has dismissed that most annoying of guests—remorse—from her bosom. She promises herself that interest will supply the place of love in chaining the too seductive youth to her side. It is with this object that she invests him with false honours and dignity, and introduces him to the chief mandarins of the capital of the Celestial Empire; then, since so handsome a youth must cut a fine figure in society, and as a fine figure cannot be cut without money, the lady sacrifices all she possesses for his sake. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, diamonds, and pearls, are all surrendered. The monster carries all these jewels to the pawnbrokers in the Tien-Tsi street, and then has the cruelty to refuse her the tickets, by means of which she might redeem her treasures."

The merry-andrew thought that he had at last hit the mark. Madame Fauvel began to betray signs of agitation. Once she made an attempt to rise from her seat and to retire, but it seemed as if her strength failed her, and she sank back, forced to listen to the end.

"Finally, ladies and gentlemen," continued the merry-andrew, "the richly-filled jewel-cases became empty. The day arrived when the mandarine had nothing more to give. It was then that the young scoundrel conceived the project of carrying off the jasper button belonging to the Mandarin Li-Fô—a splendid jewel of incalculable value, which, being the badge of his dignity, was kept in a granite stronghold, and guarded by three soldiers night and day. Ah! the mandarine resisted for a long time! She knew the innocent soldiers would be accused and crucified, as is the

custom in Pekin ; and this thought restrained her. But her lover besought her so tenderly, that she finally yielded to his entreaties ; and—the jasper button was stolen. The fourth picture represents the guilty couple stealthily creeping down the private staircase : see their frightened looks—see—”

The merry-andrew abruptly stopped. Three or four of his auditors rushed to the assistance of Madame Fauvel, who seemed about to faint ; and at the same moment he felt his arm roughly seized by some one behind him. He turned round and found himself face to face with M. de Clameran and Raoul de Lagors, both of whom were pale with anger.

“What do you require, gentlemen ?” he asked politely.

“To speak with you,” they answered in a breath.

“I am at your service.” And he followed them to the end of the picture-gallery, near a window opening on to a balcony. Here they were unobserved except by the man in the Venetian cloak, whom the merry-andrew had so respectfully addressed as “Monsieur the Count.” The minuet having ended, the musicians were resting, and the crowd began rapidly to fill the gallery. Madame Fauvel’s sudden faintness had passed off unnoticed save by a few, who attributed it to the heat of the room. M. Fauvel had been sent for ; but when he came hurrying in, and found his wife composedly talking to Madeleine, his alarm was dissipated, and he returned to the card-tables.

Not having as much control over his temper as Raoul, M. de Clameran angrily remarked to the merry-andrew : “In the first place, sir, I should like to know who I am speaking to.”

The merry-andrew, determined to answer as if he thought the question were a jest, replied in the bantering tone of a buffoon : “You want my passport, do you, my lord doge ? I left it in the hands of the city authorities ; it contains my name, age, profession, domicile, and every detail.”

With an angry gesture, M. de Clameran interrupted him. “You have just committed a most vile action !”

“I, my lord doge ?”

“Yes, you ! What is the meaning of the abominable story you have been relating ?”

“Abominable ! You may say so, if you like ; but I, who composed it, entertain a different opinion.”

“Enough, sir ; you might at least have the courage to acknowledge that your allusions conveyed a vile insinuation against Madame Fauvel.”

The merry-andrew stood with his head thrown back, and mouth wide open, as if astounded at what he heard. But any one who knew him would have detected his bright black eyes sparkling with malicious satisfaction.

“Bless my heart !” he cried, as if speaking to himself. “This is the strangest thing I ever heard of ! How can my drama of the Mandarinine Li-Fô, have any reference to Madame Fauvel, whom I don’t know from Adam or Eve ? I can’t think how the resemblance—unless—but no, that is impossible.”

“Do you pretend,” said M. de Clameran, “to be ignorant of M. Fauvel’s misfortune ?”

The merry-andrew looked very innocent, and asked : “A misfortune ?”

“I mean the robbery of which M. Fauvel is the victim. It is in every one’s mouth, and you must have heard of it.”

“Ah, yes, yes ; I remember. His cashier has run off with three hundred and fifty thousand francs. Gracious me ! It is a thing that almost happens

daily. But, as to discovering any connection between this robbery and my story, that is quite another matter."

M. de Clameran did not hasten to reply. A nudge from De Lagors had calmed him as if by enchantment. He looked suspiciously at the mountebank, and seemed to regret having uttered the significant words forced from him by angry excitement. "Very well," he finally said in his usual haughty tone; "I must have been mistaken. I accept your explanation."

But the merry-andrew, hitherto so humble and foolish-looking, seemed to take offence at the last word, and assuming a defiant attitude, exclaimed: "I have not given, nor had I to give, any explanation."

"Sir!" began De Clameran.

"Allow me to finish, if you please. If, unintentionally, I have offended the wife of a man whom I highly esteem, it is, I fancy, his business to seek redress, and not yours. Perhaps you will tell me he is too old to demand satisfaction, very likely; but he has sons, and I have just seen one of them here. You asked me who I am; in return I ask you who are you—you who undertake to act as Madame Fauvel's champion? Are you her relative, friend, or ally? What right have you to insult her by pretending to discover an allusion to her in a story invented for amusement?"

There was nothing to be said in reply to this. M. de Clameran sought a means of evading a complete answer. "I am a friend of M. Fauvel," he said, "and this title gives me the right to be as jealous of his reputation as if it were my own. If you do not think this a sufficient reason for my interference, I must inform you that his family will shortly be mine."

"Ah!"

"Next week, sir, my marriage with Mademoiselle Madeleine will be publicly announced."

This news was so unexpected, so strange, that for a moment the merry-andrew was fairly astounded. But he soon recovered himself, and bowing with deference, said, with covert irony: "Permit me to offer you my congratulations, sir. Besides being the belle of to-night's ball, Mademoiselle Madeleine is worth, I hear, half a million."

Raoul de Lagors had anxiously been watching the people near them, to see if they overheard this conversation. "We have had enough of this gossip," he said, in a disdainful tone; "I will only say one thing to you, my fine fellow, and that is, your tongue is too long."

"Perhaps it is, my pretty youth, perhaps it is; but my arm is still longer."

De Clameran here interrupted them by exclaiming: "It is impossible to have an explanation with a man who conceals his identity under the guise of a fool."

"You are at liberty, my lord doge, to ask the master of the house who I am—if you dare."

"You are," cried Clameran, "you are—" A warning look from Raoul checked the noble iron-founder from using an epithet which might have led to an affray, or at least a scandalous scene.

The merry-andrew stood by with a sardonic smile, and, after a moment's silence, stared M. de Clameran steadily in the face, and in measured tones said: "I was the best friend, sir, that your dead brother Gaston ever had. I was his adviser, and the confidant of his last hopes."

These words came like a clap of thunder on De Clameran, who turned deadly pale, and started back with his hands stretched out before him, as

if shrinking from a phantom. He tried to answer, to protest, to say something, but terror froze the words upon his tongue.

"Come, let us go," said De Lagors, who had remained perfectly self-possessed. And he dragged De Clameran away, half supporting him, for he staggered like a drunken man, and clung to every object he passed, to prevent himself from falling.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed the merry-andrew, in three different tones. He was almost as much astonished as the forge-master, and remained rooted to the spot, watching the latter as he slowly left the room. It was with no decided object in view that the merry-andrew had ventured to use the last mysteriously threatening words, but he had been inspired to do so by his wonderful instinct, which with him was like the scent of a bloodhound. "What can this mean?" he murmured. "Why was he so frightened? What terrible memory have I awakened in his base soul? I need not boast of my penetration, or the subtlety of my plans. There is a great master, who, without any effort, in an instant destroys all our chimeras; he is called 'Chance.'"

His mind had wandered far from the present scene, when he was brought back to his situation by some one touching him on the shoulder. It was the man in the Venetian cloak. "Are you satisfied, M. Verduret?" he inquired.

"Yes and no, Monsieur the Count. No, because I have not completely achieved the object I had in view when I asked you to obtain an invitation for me here to-night; yes, because these two rascals behaved in a manner which dispels all doubt."

"And yet you complain—"

"I do not complain, sir; on the contrary, I bless chance, or rather Providence, which has just revealed to me the existence of a secret that I did not before even suspect."

Five or six people approached the count, and he went off with them after giving M. Verduret a friendly nod. The latter instantly threw aside his banner, and started in pursuit of Madame Fauvel. He found her sitting on a sofa, in the ball-room, engaged in an animated conversation with Madeleine. "Of course they are talking over the scene; but what has become of De Lagors and De Clameran?" thought he. He soon caught sight of them wandering among the groups scattered about the room, and eagerly asking questions. "I will bet my head," he muttered, "these honourable gentlemen are trying to find out who I am. Ask away, my friends, ask away!"

They soon gave over their enquiries, but were so pre-occupied, and anxious to be alone in order to reflect and deliberate, that, without waiting for the supper, they took leave of Madame Fauvel and her niece, saying they were going home. The merry-andrew saw them enter the cloak-room to fetch their cloaks; and in a few minutes they left the house. "I have nothing more to do here," he murmured; "I may as well go too."

Completely covering his dress with a large overcoat, he started for home, thinking the cold frosty air would cool his confused brain. He lit a cigar, and, walking up the Rue St. Lazare, crossed the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and struck into the Faubourg Montmartre. A man suddenly darted out from some place of concealment, and rushed upon him with a dagger. Fortunately the merry-andrew had a cat-like instinct, which enabled him to protect himself against immediate danger, and detect any harm which threatened. He saw, or rather divined, the man crouching in the dark

shadow of a house, and had the presence of mind to step back and spread out his arms before him, and so ward off the would-be assassin. This movement certainly saved his life; for he received in the arm a furious stab, which would have instantly killed him had it penetrated his breast. Anger, more than pain, made him exclaim: "Ah, you villain!" And recoiling a few feet, he put himself on the defensive. The precaution, however, was useless; for seeing his blow miss the mark, the assassin did not return to the attack, but made rapidly off.

"That was certainly De Lagors," thought the merry-andrew, "and De Clameran must be somewhere near. While I walked round one side of the church, they must have gone the other and lain in wait for me."

His wound began to pain him very much, and he stood under a gas-lamp to examine it. It did not appear to be dangerous, although the arm was cut through to the bone. He tore his handkerchief into four bands, and tied his arm up with them with the dexterity of a surgeon. "I must be on the track of some great crime," said he, "since these fellows are resolved upon murder. When such cunning rogues are only in danger of the police court, they do not gratuitously risk the chance of being tried for murder." He thought that by enduring a great deal of pain he might still use his arm, so he started in pursuit of his enemy, taking care to keep in the middle of the road, and to avoid all dark corners. Although he saw no one, he was convinced that he was being followed. He was not mistaken. When he reached the Boulevard Montmartre, he crossed the street, and, as he did so, distinguished two shadows which he recognised. They also crossed the street a little higher up.

"I have to deal with desperate men," he muttered. "They do not even take the pains to conceal their pursuit of me. They seem to be accustomed to this kind of adventure, and the carriage trick which fooled Fanferlot would never succeed with them. Besides, my light hat is a perfect beacon to lead them on in the night." He continued his way up the boulevard, and, without turning his head, felt sure that his enemies were not more than thirty paces behind him. "I must get rid of them somehow," he said to himself. "I can neither return home nor to the Grand Archangel with these devils at my heels. They are following me now to find out where I live, and who I am. If they discover the merry-andrew is M. Verduret, and that M. Verduret is M. Lecoq, my plans will be ruined. They will escape abroad with the money, and I shall be left to console myself with a wounded arm. A pleasant ending to all my exertions!"

The idea of Raoul and De Clameran escaping him so exasperated him that for an instant he thought of having them arrested at once. This was easy enough, for he only had to rush upon them, shout for help, and they would all three be arrested, conducted to the police-station and brought before the commissary. The police often resort to this ingenious and simple means to arrest a criminal whom they may meet by chance, and whom they cannot seize without a warrant. The merry-andrew had sufficient proof to sustain him in the arrest of De Lagors. He could produce the letter and the mutilated prayer-book, he could reveal the existence of the pawn-broker's tickets in the house at Vésinet, he could show his wounded arm. He could, if necessary, force Raoul to confess how and why he had assumed the name of De Lagors, and what his motive was in passing himself off as a relative of M. Fauvel. On the other hand, in acting thus hastily, he would be, perhaps, insuring the safety of the principal plotter, De Clameran. What absolute proofs had he against him? Not one. He had strong

suspicious, but no real grounds for making any criminal charge. On reflection, the detective decided that he would act alone, as he had thus far done, and that alone and unaided he would discover the truth of his suspicions.

Having arrived at this decision, the first step to be taken was to put his pursuers on the wrong scent. He walked rapidly along the Boulevard Sébastopol, and, reaching the square of the Arts et Métiers, he abruptly stopped, and asked some insignificant questions of two policemen, who were standing talking together. This manœuvre had the result he expected; Raoul and De Clameran stood perfectly still about twenty steps off, not daring to advance. While talking with the constables, the merry-andrew pulled the bell of the door before which they were standing, and the sound that ensued apprised him that the door was open. He bowed, and entered the house.

A minute later the constables had passed on, and De Lagors and De Clameran in their turn rang the bell. When the door was opened, they roused up the concierge and asked who it was that had just gone in disguised as a merry-andrew. They were told that he had seen no such person, and that none of the lodgers had gone out in fancy costume that night. "However," added the man, "I am not perfectly sure, for this house has another door which opens on the Rue St. Denis."

"We are tricked," interrupted De Lagors, "and will never know who this merry-andrew is."

"Unless we learn it too soon for our own advantage," said De Clameran musingly.

While the pair were lamenting their failure in discovering the merry-andrew's identity, Verduret hurried along and reached the Grand Archangel as the clock struck three. Prosper, who was watching from his window, saw him in the distance, and ran down to open the door for him. "What have you learned?" he asked: "what did you find out? Did you see Madeleine? Were Raoul and De Clameran at the ball?"

But M. Verduret was not in the habit of discussing private affairs where he might be overheard. "First of all, let us go into your room," said he, "and then get me some water to wash this cut, which burns like fire."

"Heavens! Are you wounded?"

"Yes, it is a little souvenir of your friend Raoul. Ah, I will soon teach him the danger of scratching my skin!" Prosper was surprised at the look of merciless rage on his friend's face, as he calmly washed and dressed his arm. "Now, Prosper, we will talk as much as you please," resumed M. Verduret. "Our enemies are on the alert, and we must crush them instantly. I have made a mistake. I have been on the wrong track; it is an accident liable to happen to any man, no matter how intelligent he may be. I took the effect for the cause. The day I was convinced that culpable relations existed between Raoul and Madame Fauvel, I thought I held the end of the thread that would lead us to the truth. I ought to have been more mistrustful; this solution was too simple, too natural."

"Do you suppose Madame Fauvel to be innocent?"

"Certainly not; but her guilt is not such as I first supposed. I imagined that, infatuated with a seductive young adventurer, Madame Fauvel had bestowed upon him the name of one of her relatives, and then introduced him to her husband as her nephew. This was an adroit stratagem to gain him admission to the house. She began by giving him all the money she could dispose of; then she let him have her jewels to pawn; and at length

having nothing more to give, she allowed him to steal the money from her husband's safe. That is what I first thought."

"And in this way everything was explained?"

"No, this did not explain everything, as I well knew at the time, and should, consequently, have studied my characters more thoroughly. How is De Clameran's ascendancy to be accounted for, if my first idea was the correct one?"

"De Clameran is De Lagors's accomplice, of course."

"Ah, there is the mistake! I for a long time believed De Lagors to be the person principally concerned, whereas, in fact, he is nothing. Yesterday, in a dispute between them, the forge-master said to him, 'And, above all, my young friend, I would advise you not to resist me, for if you do I will crush you to atoms.' That explains all. The elegant De Lagors is not Madame Fauvel's lover, but De Clameran's tool. Besides, did our first suppositions account for Madeleine's resigned obedience? It is De Clameran, and not De Lagors, whom she obeys."

Prosper began to remonstrate. M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders. To convince him he had only to tell him that three hours ago De Clameran had announced his approaching marriage with Madeleine; but he refrained from doing so. "De Clameran," he continued, "De Clameran alone has Madame Fauvel in his power. Now, the question is, what is the secret of this terrible influence he has gained over her? I have positive proof that they have not met since their early youth until fifteen months ago; and, as Madame Fauvel's reputation has always been above the reach of slander, we must seek in the past for the cause of her resigned obedience to his will."

"We shall never discover it," said Prosper mournfully.

"We shall know it as soon as we have learnt the history of De Clameran's past life. Ah, to-night he turned as white as a sheet when I mentioned his brother Gaston's name. And then I remembered that Gaston died suddenly, while his brother Louis was on a visit to him."

"Do you think he was murdered?"

"I think the men who tried to assassinate me would do anything. The robbery, my friend, has now become a secondary affair. It is easily explained, and, if that were all that had to be accounted for, I would say to you: 'My task is done, let us go and ask the investigating magistrate for a warrant of arrest.'"

Prosper started up with sparkling eyes, and exclaimed: "What, you know then—is it possible?"

"Yes, I know who gave the key, and I know who told the secret word."

"The key may have been M. Fauvel's. But the word—"

"The word, unlucky man, you gave yourself. You have forgotten, I suppose. But, fortunately, Nina remembered. You know that a couple of days before the robbery, you took De Lagors and two other friends to sup with Madame Gipsy? Nina was sad, and reproached you for not being more devoted to her."

"Yes, I remember that."

"But do you remember what you replied to her?"

"No, I do not," said Prosper after thinking a moment.

"Well, I will tell you; you said: 'Nina, you are unjust in reproaching me with not thinking constantly of you, for at this very moment it is your dear name that guards my employer's safe.'"

The truth suddenly burst upon Prosper like a thunderclap. He wrung

his hands despairingly, and exclaimed: "Yes, oh yes! I remember now."

"Then you can easily understand the rest. One of the scoundrels went to Madame Fauvel, and compelled her to give up her husband's key; then, at a venture, he placed the movable buttons on the name of Gipsy, opened the safe, and took from it the three hundred and fifty thousand francs. And Madame Fauvel must have been terribly frightened before she yielded. The day after the robbery the poor woman was near dying; and it was she who at the greatest risk sent you the ten thousand francs."

"But who was the thief, Raoul or De Clameran? What enables them to thus tyrannise over Madame Fauvel? And how does Madeleine come to be mixed up in this disgraceful affair?"

"These questions, my dear Prosper, I cannot yet answer; therefore I postpone going to see the magistrate. I must ask you to wait ten days; and, if in that time I cannot discover the solution of this mystery, I will return, and we will go together to M. Patrigent."

"Are you then going away?"

"In an hour I shall be on the road to Beaucaire. It was from that neighbourhood that De Clameran came, as well as Madame Fauvel, who was a Mademoiselle de La Verberie before her marriage."

"Yes, I have heard of both families."

"I must go there to study them. Neither Raoul nor De Clameran can escape during my absence. The police will not lose sight of them. But you, Prosper, must be prudent. Promise me to remain a prisoner here whilst I am away."

All that M. Verduret asked, Prosper willingly promised. But he could not let him depart thus. "Will you not tell me, sir," he asked, "who you are, and your reasons for coming to my assistance?"

M. Verduret smiled sadly, and replied: "I will tell you in the presence of Nina, on the day before your marriage with Madeleine takes place."

Once left to his own reflections, Prosper began to appreciate the powerful assistance rendered to him by his friend. Recalling the field of investigation gone over by his mysterious acquaintance, he was amazed at its extent. How many facts had been discovered in a week, and with what precision, too, although he had stated he was on the wrong track! Verduret had grouped his evidence, and reached a result which Prosper felt he never could have hoped to have attained by his own exertions. He was conscious that he possessed neither M. Verduret's penetration nor his subtlety, nor the art of exacting obedience, of creating friends at every step, and of making men and circumstances conduce to the attainment of a common result. He soon began to regret the absence of this friend, who had risen up in the hour of adversity. He missed the sometimes rough but always kindly voice, which had encouraged and consoled him. He felt wofully lost and helpless, not daring to act or think for himself, more timid than a child when deserted by its nurse. He had at least the good sense to follow the recommendations of his mentor. He remained shut up at the Grand Archangel, not even showing himself at the windows. Twice he had news of M. Verduret. The first time he received a letter in which this friend said he had seen his father, and had had a long talk with him. Afterwards, Dubois, M. De Clameran's valet, came to tell him that his "chief" reported everything as progressing finely. On the ninth day of his voluntary seclusion, Prosper began to feel restless, and at ten o'clock at night wished to go for a walk,

thinking the fresh air would relieve the headache which had kept him awake the previous night. Madame Alexandre, who seemed to have some knowledge of M. Verduret's affairs, begged Prosper to remain at home.

"What do I risk by taking a walk at this hour, in a quiet part of the city?" he asked. "I can certainly stroll as far as the Jardin des Plantes without the chance of meeting any one."

Unfortunately he did not strictly follow this programme; for, having reached the Orleans railway station, he went into a café near by, and called for a glass of beer. As he sat drinking it, he glanced at a daily paper, "*Le Soleil*," and under the heading of "*Rumours of the Day*," read the following paragraph: "We understand that the niece of one of our most prominent bankers, M. André Fauvel, will be shortly married to the Marquis Louis de Clameran, a Provençal nobleman." This news, coming upon him so unexpectedly, proved to Prosper the justness of M. Verduret's calculations. Alas! why did not this certainty inspire him with absolute faith? Why did it not give him the courage to wait, the strength of mind to refrain from acting on his own responsibility. Frenzied by distress of mind, he already saw Madeleine indissolubly united to this villain, and, thinking that M. Verduret would perhaps arrive too late to be of use, determined at all risks to throw an obstacle in the way of the marriage. He called for pen and paper, and, forgetting that no situation can excuse the mean cowardice of an anonymous letter, wrote in a disguised hand the following lines to M. Fauvel:

"Dear Sir,—You consigned your cashier to prison; you acted rightly, since you were convinced of his dishonesty and faithlessness. But, even if he stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs from your safe, does it follow that he also stole Madame Fauvel's diamonds, and took them to the pawnbroker's where they now are? Warned as you are, were I you, I would not be the subject of public scandal, but I would watch my wife, and would soon discover that one should ever be distrustful of handsome cousins. Moreover, before signing Mademoiselle Madeleine's marriage contract, I would call at the Préfecture of Police, and obtain some information concerning the noble Marquis de Clameran.—A FRIEND."

Prosper hastened off to post his letter. Fearing that it would not reach M. Fauvel in time, he walked to one of the head offices in the Rue Cardinal Lemoine, and put it into the letter-box. Until this moment he had not doubted the propriety of his action. But now, when too late, when he heard the sound of his letter falling into the box, a thousand scruples filled his mind. Was it not wrong to act thus hurriedly? Would not this letter interfere with all M. Verduret's plans? Upon reaching the hotel, his doubts were changed into bitter regrets. Joseph Dubois was waiting for him; he had received a telegram from his chief saying that his business was finished, and that he would return the next evening at nine o'clock. Prosper was wretched. He would have given all he had to recover the anonymous letter. And he had cause for regret. For at that very hour M. Verduret was taking his seat in the train at Tarascon, and meditating upon the most advantageous plan to be adopted in pursuance of his discoveries. For he had discovered everything.

Adding to what he already knew, the story of an old servant of Mademoiselle de La Verberie, the affidavit of an old footman who had always lived in the De Clameran family, and the depositions of the married couple in the service of De Lagors at his Vésinet country-house, the latter having been sent to him by Dubois (Fanferlot), with a good deal of information

obtained from the Préfecture of Police, he had worked up a complete case, and could now act upon a chain of evidence without a missing link. As he had predicted, he had been compelled to search into the distant past for the first causes of the crime of which Prosper had been the victim. The following is the drama, as written out by him for the benefit of the examining magistrate with the certainty that it contained sufficient grounds for preferring an indictment.

XII.

ABOUT two leagues from Tarascon, on the left bank of the Rhone, not far from Messrs. Audibert's wonderful gardens, stood the château of Clameran, a weather-stained, neglected, but massive structure. Here lived, in 1841, the old Marquis de Clameran and his two sons, Gaston and Louis. The marquis was an eccentric old man. He belonged to the race of nobles, now almost extinct, whose watches stopped in 1789, and who keep the time of a past century. More attached to his illusions than to his life, the old marquis insisted upon considering all the stirring events which had happened since the first revolution as a series of deplorable practical jokes. Emigrating in the suite of the Count d'Artois, he did not return to France until 1815, with the allies. He should have been thankful to heaven for the recovery of a portion of his immense family estates; a comparatively small portion, it is true, but still sufficient to support him honourably. He said, however, that he did not think the few paltry acres worth thanking heaven for. At first he tried every means to obtain an appointment at court; but, finding all his efforts fail, he resolved to retire to his château, which he did, after cursing and pitying his king, whom he worshipped, and whom, at the bottom of his heart, he regarded as a thorough Jacobin.

The Marquis de Clameran soon became accustomed to the free and indolent life of a country nobleman. Possessing about fifteen thousand francs a year, he spent twenty-five or thirty thousand, borrowing even on his estates, on the pretence that a genuine Restoration would soon take place, and that he would then regain possession of all his properties. Following his example, his younger son Louis, lived extravagantly, and was always in pursuit of adventure, or idling away his time in drinking and gambling. The elder son, Gaston, anxious to participate in the stirring events of the time, studied hard, and read certain papers and pamphlets surreptitiously received, the mere titles of which were regarded by his father as blasphemous. Altogether the old marquis was the happiest of mortals, eating and drinking well, hunting a good deal, tolerated by the peasants, and execrated by the neighbouring townspeople, whom he treated with contempt and raillery. Time never hung heavy on his hands, excepting in the summer, when the valley of the Rhône was intensely hot; but even then he had infallible means of amusement ever fresh, though always the same. It was to speak ill of his neighbour the Countess de La Verberie.

The Countess de La Verberie, the marquis's special aversion, was a tall, wiry woman, angular in character, as well as in appearance, cold and arrogant towards her equals, and domineering over her inferiors. Like her noble neighbour, she had emigrated with her husband, who was afterwards killed at Lutzen, but, unfortunately for his memory, not in the French ranks. In 1815, the countess also came back to France. But while the Marquis de

Clameran returned to comparative ease, she could obtain nothing from royal munificence, but the small estate and château of La Verberie, and a pension of two thousand five hundred francs. The countess had but one child—a lovely girl of eighteen, named Valentine; fair, slender, and graceful, with large, soft eyes, beautiful enough to make the stone saints of the village church thrill in their niches, when she knelt piously at their feet. The renown of her great beauty, carried along on the rapid waters of the Rhone, had spread far and wide. Often the boatmen and the robust drivers urging their powerful horses along the towpath, would stop to gaze with admiration upon Valentine seated under some grand old trees on the bank of the river, absorbed in a book. At a distance, in her white dress and flowing tresses, she seemed to these honest people a mysterious spirit from another world, and they regarded it as a good omen when they caught a glimpse of her. All along between Arles and Valence she was spoken of as the “lovely fairy” of La Verberie.

If M. de Clameran detested the countess, Madame de La Verberie execrated the marquis. If he nicknamed her “the witch,” she retaliated by calling him “the old gander.” And yet they ought to have agreed, for at heart they cherished the same opinions, though viewing them in different ways. The marquis considered himself a philosopher, scoffed at everything, and had an excellent digestion. The countess nursed her old grievances, and grew sallow and thin from rage and envy. Still, they might have spent many pleasant evenings together, for, after all, they were neighbours. From Clameran could be seen Valentine’s greyhound running about the park of La Verberie; from La Verberie glimpses were had of the lights in the dining-room windows of Clameran. And, regularly as these lights were discerned every evening, the countess would say in a spiteful tone: “Ah, now their orgies are about to commence!” The two châteaux were only separated by the fast-flowing Rhone, which at this spot was rather narrow. But between the two families existed a hatred deeper and more difficult to avert than even the river’s course. What was the cause of this hatred? The countess, no less than the marquis, would have found it difficult to tell. It was related that under the reign of Henri IV., or Louis XIII., a La Verberie had seduced a fair daughter of the De Clamerans. The misdeed in question led to a duel; swords flashed in the sunlight, and blood stained the fresh green grass. This groundwork of facts had been highly embellished by fiction; handed down from generation to generation, it became a long tragic history of perfidy, murder, and rapine, precluding any intercourse between the two families.

The usual result followed, as it always does in real life, and often in romances, which, however exaggerated they may be, generally preserve a reflection of the truth which inspires them. Gaston met Valentine at an entertainment; and fell in love with her at first sight. Valentine saw Gaston, and from that moment his image filled her heart. But so many obstacles separated them! For more than a year they both religiously guarded their secret, buried like a treasure in the inmost recesses of their hearts. This year of charring, dangerous reveries decided their fate. To the sweetness of their first impressions a more tender sentiment succeeded; then came love, each of them endowing the other with superhuman qualities and ideal perfections. Deep, sincere passion expands only in solitude: in the impure air of a city it fades and dies, like the hardy plants of the south, which lose their colour and perfume when transplanted into our hot-houses. Gaston and Valentine had only seen each other once, but seeing

was to love; and, as the time passed, their love grew stronger, until at last the fatality which had presided over their first meeting brought them once more together. They chanced to be visiting at the same time the old Duchess d'Arlange, who had recently returned to the neighbourhood to dispose of her remaining property. They spoke to each other, and like old friends, surprised to find that they entertained the same thoughts and echoed the same memories. Again they were separated for months. But ere long, as if by accident, both chanced to be regularly on the banks of the Rhone, at a certain hour, when they would sit and gaze across the river at each other. Finally, one mild May evening, when Madame de La Verberie had gone to Beaucaire, Gaston ventured into the park, and presented himself before Valentine. She was neither surprised nor indignant. Genuine innocence displays none of the startled modesty assumed by its conventional counterfeit. It never occurred to Valentine to bid Gaston to leave her. She leaned upon his arm, and strolled up and down the grand old avenue of oaks with him. They did not say they loved each other, they felt it; but they did say with tears in their eyes that their love was hopeless. They well knew that the inveterate family feud could never be overcome, and that the attempt would be mere folly. They swore never, never to forget each other, and mournfully resolved never to meet again, excepting just once more!

Alas! Valentine was not without excuse. Possessed of a timid, loving heart, her expansive affection had always been repressed and chilled by a harsh mother. Never had there been one of those long private talks between the Countess de La Verberie and Valentine which enable a good mother to read her daughter's heart like an open book. Madame de La Verberie concerned herself only with her daughter's beauty. She was wont to think: "Next winter I will borrow enough money to take the child to Paris, and I am much mistaken if her handsome looks do not win her a rich husband and release me from this wretched state of poverty." She considered this loving her daughter! The second meeting of the lovers was not the last. Gaston dared not trust a boatman, so that he had to walk a league in order to cross the bridge. He thought it would be shorter work to swim the river; but he could not swim well, and to cross the Rhone where it ran so rapidly was a rash proceeding even for the most skilful swimmer.

However, he practised privately, and to such good purpose that one evening Valentine was startled by seeing him rise out of the water at her feet. She made him promise never to attempt this exploit again. Still he repeated the feat and the promise the next and every successive evening. As Valentine was always imagining he was being drowned in the furious current, they agreed upon a signal to relieve her anxiety. At the moment of starting, Gaston would place a light in his window at Clameran, and in a quarter of an hour he would be at his idol's feet.

What were the projects and hopes of the lovers? Alas! they had no projects, and they hoped for nothing. Blindly, thoughtlessly, almost fearlessly, they abandoned themselves to the dangerous happiness of a daily meeting. Regardless of the storm that threatened to burst over their heads, they revelled in their present happiness. Is it not like this with every sincere passion? Love subsists upon itself and in itself; and the very things which ought to extinguish it, absence and obstacles, only cause it to burn more fiercely. It is exclusive and troubled neither with the past or the future; it sees and cares for nothing beyond its present enjoy-

ment. Moreover, Valentine and Gaston believed every one ignorant of their secret. They had always been so exceedingly cautious! they had kept such a strict watch! They flattered themselves that their conduct had been a masterpiece of dissimulation and prudence. Valentine had fixed upon a time for their meetings when she was certain her mother would not miss her. Gaston had never confided his secret to any one, not even to his brother Louis. They never mentioned each other's name. They denied themselves a last sweet word, a final kiss, when they felt these would be attended with danger. Poor blind lovers! As if anything could be concealed from the idle curiosity of country gossips; from the slanderous spirits ever on the look-out for some new bit of scandal, on which they improve, and eagerly spread far and near. They believed their secret well kept, whereas it had long since been a matter of public notoriety; the story of their love, the particulars of their meetings, were topics of conversation throughout the neighbourhood. Sometimes at dusk they would see a boat gliding through the water, close to the shore, and would say to each other: "It is a belated fisherman returning home." They were mistaken. On board the boat were spies, who, delighted at having discovered them, hastened to report, with a number of false details, the result of their shameful expedition.

One dreary November evening, Gaston was awakened to the true state of affairs. The Rhone was so swollen by heavy rains that an inundation was daily expected. To attempt to swim across this impetuous torrent, would be tempting Providence. Gaston therefore went to Tarascon, intending to cross the bridge there, and to walk along the bank to the usual place of meeting at La Verberie, where Valentine expected him at eleven o'clock. Whenever Gaston went to Tarascon, he dined with a relative living there; but on this occasion a strange fatality led him to accompany a friend to the Hotel of the Three Emperors. After dinner, instead of going to the Café Simon, their usual resort, they went to the little café, facing the open space where the fairs are held. They found the small apartment crowded with young men of the town. Gaston and his friend called for a bottle of beer, and commenced a game at billiards. After they had been playing for a short time, Gaston's attention was attracted by peals of forced laughter from a party at the other end of the room. From this moment, with his attention taken up by this continued laughter, of which he believed himself the object, he knocked the balls about recklessly. His conduct surprised his friend, who remarked to him: "Why, what is the matter? You are missing the simplest strokes."

"It is nothing."

The game continued a little while longer, when Gaston suddenly turned as white as a sheet, and, throwing down his cue, strode towards the table which was occupied by five young men, playing dominoes and drinking mulled wine. He addressed the elder of the group, a handsome man of twenty-six, with large bright eyes, and a fierce black moustache, named Jules Lazet. "Repeat, if you dare," he said, in a voice trembling with passion, "the remark you just now made!"

"Who would prevent me?" asked Lazet calmly. "I said, and I repeat, that a nobleman's daughter is no better than a workman's daughter; that virtue does not necessarily accompany a title."

"You mentioned a particular name!"

Lazet rose from his chair as if he knew his answer would exasperate Gaston, and that from words they would come to blows. "I did," he said,

with an insolent smile. "I mentioned the name of the pretty little fairy of La Verberie."

At this all the young men, and even a couple of commercial travellers who were dining at the café, rose and surrounded the two disputants. The provoking looks, the murmurs, the shouts, which were directed towards Gaston as he walked up to Lazet, convinced him that he was surrounded by enemies. The wickedness and the evil tongue of the old marquis were bearing their fruit. Rancour ferments quickly and fiercely in the hearts and heads of the people of Provence. But Gaston de Clameran was not a man to withdraw, even if his foes were a hundred, instead of fifteen or twenty.

"No one but a coward," he said, in a clear, ringing voice, which the pervading silence rendered almost startling; "no one but a contemptible coward would be base enough to calumniate a young girl who has neither father nor brother to defend her honour."

"If she has no father or brother," sneered Lazet, "she has her lovers, and that suffices."

The insulting words, "her lovers," enraged Gaston beyond control; he struck Lazet violently in the face. Every one in the café simultaneously uttered a cry of alarm. Lazet's violence of character, his herculean strength and undaunted courage, were well known. He sprang over the table that separated him from Gaston, and seized him by the throat. Then arose a scene of excitement and confusion. De Clameran's friend, attempting to assist him, was knocked down with billiard-cues, and kicked under a table. Equally strong and agile, Gaston and Lazet struggled for some minutes without either gaining an advantage. Lazet, as loyal as he was courageous, would not accept assistance from his friends. He continually called out: "Keep away; let me fight it out alone!"

But the others were too excited to remain inactive spectators of the scene. "A blanket quick!" cried one of them; "a blanket to toss the marquis!"

Five or six young men now rushed upon Gaston, and separated him from Lazet. Some tried to throw him down, others to trip him up. He defended himself with the energy of despair, exhibiting in his furious struggles a strength of which no one would have thought him capable. He struck right and left as he showered fierce epithets upon his adversaries who were twelve against one. He was endeavouring to get round the billiard-table so as to be near the door, and had almost succeeded, when an exultant cry arose: "Here is the blanket!"

"Put him in the blanket—the little fairy's lover!"

Gaston heard these cries. He saw himself overcome, and suffering an ignoble outrage at the hands of these enraged men. By a dexterous movement he extricated himself from the grasp of the three who were holding him, and felled a fourth to the ground. His arms were free; but all his enemies returned to the charge. Then he seemed to lose his head, and seizing a knife which lay on the table where the commercial travellers had been dining, he plunged it twice into the breast of the first man who rushed upon him. This unfortunate person was Jules Lazet. He dropped to the ground. There was a second of silent horror. Then four or five of the young men rushed forward to raise Lazet. The landlady ran about wringing her hands, and screaming with fright. Some of the younger assailants rushed into the streets shouting: "Murder! Murder!" But all the others turned upon Gaston with cries of vengeance. He felt that

he was lost. His enemies seized the first objects they could lay their hands upon and he received several wounds. He jumped upon the billiard-table, and making a rapid spring, dashed at the large window of the café. He was fearfully cut by the broken glass and splinters, but he passed through.

Gaston was outside, but he was not yet saved. Astonished and disconcerted at his desperate feat, his assailants for a moment were stupefied ; but recovering their presence of mind, they started in pursuit of him. The weather was bad, the ground wet and muddy, and heavy black clouds were rolling westward ; but the night was not dark. Gaston ran on from tree to tree, making frequent turnings, every moment on the point of being surrounded and seized, and asking himself what course he should take. Finally he determined, if possible, to reach Claméran. With incredible rapidity he darted diagonally across the open space, in the direction of the embankment which protects the valley of Tarascon from inundations. Unfortunately, upon reaching this embankment, planted with magnificent trees, which make it one of the most charming promenades of Provence, Gaston forgot that the entrance was partially closed by three posts, such as are always placed before walks intended for foot-passengers only, and rushed against one of them with such violence that he was thrown back and badly bruised. He quickly sprang up ; but his pursuers were upon him. This time he could expect no mercy. The infuriated men at his heels yelled that fearful cry, which in the evil days of lawless bloodshed had often echoed in that valley : "To the Rhone with him ! To the Rhone with the marquis !"

His reason had abandoned him ; he no longer knew what he did. His forehead was cut, and the blood trickled from the wound into his eyes, and blinded him. He must escape, or die in the attempt. He had tightly clasped the bloody knife with which he had stabbed Lazet. He struck his nearest foe ; the man fell to the ground with a heavy groan. This blow gained him a moment's respite, which gave him time to pass between the posts, and rush along the embankment. Two men remained kneeling over their wounded companion, and five others resumed the pursuit. But Gaston ran fast, for the horror of his situation tripled his energy ; excitement deadened the pain of his wounds ; with elbows kept tight to his sides, and holding his breath, he went along at such a speed that he soon distanced his pursuers ; the sound of their footsteps became gradually more indistinct, and finally ceased. Gaston ran on for another mile, across fields and through hedges ; fences and ditches were leaped without effort, and only when he knew he was safe from capture he sank down at the foot of a tree to rest. This terrible scene had taken place with inconceivable rapidity. Only forty minutes had elapsed since Gaston and his friend entered the café. But during this short time how much had happened ! These forty minutes had given him more cause for sorrow and remorse than the whole of his previous life put together. Entering this café with head erect and a happy heart, enjoying present existence, and looking forward to a yet better future, he left it ruined ; for he was a murderer ! He had killed a man, and still convulsively held the murderous instrument ; he cast it from him with horror. He tried to account for the dreadful circumstances which had just taken place ; as if it were of any importance to a man lying at the bottom of an abyss to know which stone had slipped, and precipitated him from the summit. Still, if he alone had been lost ! But Valentine was dragged down with him ; her reputation was gone. And it was his want

of self-command which had cast to the winds this honour, confided to his keeping, and which he held far dearer than his own.

But he could not remain here bewailing his misfortune. The authorities must soon be on his track. They would certainly go to the château of Clameran to seek him; and before leaving home, perhaps for ever, he wished to say good-bye to his father, and once more press Valentine to his heart. He started to walk, but with great pain, for the reaction had come, and his nerves and muscles, so violently strained, had now begun to relax; the intense heat caused by his struggling and fast running was replaced by a cold perspiration, aching limbs, and chattering teeth. His hip and shoulder pained him almost beyond endurance. The cut on his forehead had almost stopped bleeding, but the coagulated blood round his eyes nearly blinded him. After a painful walk he reached home at ten o'clock. The old valet who admitted him started back terrified.

"Good heavens, sir! what is the matter?"

"Silence!" said Gaston in the brief, compressed tone always inspired by imminent danger; "silence! Where is my father?"

"The marquis is in his room with M. Louis. He has had a sudden attack of the gout, and cannot put his foot to the ground; but you, sir—"

Gaston did not stop to listen further. He hurried to his father's room. The old marquis, who was playing backgammon with Louis, dropped his dice-box with a cry of horror, when he looked up and saw his eldest son standing before him covered with blood. "What is the matter? what have you been doing, Gaston?" he exclaimed.

"I have come to embrace you for the last time, father, and to ask for assistance to escape abroad."

"You wish to fly?"

"I must, father, and instantly; I am pursued, the gendarmes may be here at any moment. I have killed two men."

The marquis was so shocked that he forgot the gout, and attempted to rise; a violent twinge made him drop back in his chair.

"Where? When?" he gasped.

"At Tarascon, in a café, an hour ago; fifteen men attacked me, and I seized a knife to defend myself."

"The old tricks of '93," said the marquis. "Did they insult you, Gaston?"

"They insulted in my presence the name of a noble young girl."

"And you punished the rascals? By heaven! you did well. Who ever heard of a nobleman allowing insolent puppies to speak disrespectfully of a lady of quality in his presence? But who was the lady you defended!"

"Mademoiselle Valentine de La Verberie."

"What!" cried the marquis, "what! the daughter of that old witch! Those accursed La Verberies have always brought misfortune upon us." He certainly abominated the countess; but his respect for her noble blood was greater than his resentment towards her individuality, and he added: "Nevertheless, Gaston, you did your duty."

Meanwhile, the curiosity of Jean, the marquis's old valet, made him venture to open the door, and ask: "Did Monsieur the Marquis ring?"

"No, you rascal," answered M. de Clameran, "you know very well I did not. But, now you are here, be useful. Quickly bring some clothes for M. Gaston, some clean linen, and some warm water: everything necessary to dress his wounds."

These orders were promptly executed, and Gaston found he was not so

badly hurt as he had thought. With the exception of a deep stab in his left shoulder, his wounds were not serious. After receiving all the attentions which his condition required, Gaston felt like a new man, ready to brave any peril. His eyes sparkled with redoubled energy. The marquis made a sign to the servants to leave the room. "Do you still think you ought to leave France?" he asked Gaston.

"Yes, father."

"My brother ought not to hesitate," interposed Louis; "he will be arrested here, thrown into prison, vilified in court, and—who knows?"

"We all know well enough that he will be convicted," grumbled the old marquis. "These are the benefits of the immortal revolution, as it is called. Ah, in my young days we three would have taken our swords, jumped on our horses, and, dashing into Tarascon, would soon have— But to-day we have to run away."

"There is no time to lose," observed Louis.

"True," said the marquis, "but to fly, to go abroad, one must have money; and I have none by me to give him."

"Father!"

"No, I have none. Ah, what a prodigal old fool I have been! Have I even a hundred louis?"

Then he told Louis to open the secretary. The drawer in which the money was kept contained only nine hundred and twenty francs in gold.

"Nine hundred and twenty francs," cried the marquis; "it is not enough. The eldest son of our house cannot fly the country with this paltry sum."

He sat lost in reflection. Suddenly his brow cleared, and he told Louis to open a secret drawer in the secretary, and bring him a small casket. Then the marquis took from his neck a black ribbon, to which was attached the key of the casket. His sons observed with what deep emotion he unlocked it, and slowly took out a necklace, a cross, several rings, and various other jewels. His countenance assumed a solemn expression. "Gaston, my dear son," he said, "at a time like this your life may depend upon bought assistance; money is power."

"I am young, father, and have courage."

"Listen to me. These jewels belonged to your sainted mother, a noble woman, who is now in heaven watching over us. They have never left me. During my days of misery and want, when I was compelled to earn a livelihood by teaching music in London, I piously treasured them. I never thought of selling them; and to pawn them, in the hour of direst need, would have seemed to me a sacrilege. But now, take them, my son, and sell them; they will fetch twenty thousand francs."

"No, father, no, I cannot take them!"

"You must, Gaston. If your mother were on earth, she would tell you to take them, as I do now. I command you to take and use them. The safety, the honour, of the heir of the house of De Clameran, must not be imperilled for want of a little gold."

With tearful eyes, Gaston sank on his knees, and, carrying his father's hand to his lips, murmured: "Thanks, father, thanks! In my heedless, ungrateful presumption I have hitherto misjudged you. I did not know your noble character. Forgive me. I accept, yes, I accept these jewels worn by my dear mother; but I take them as a sacred deposit, confided to my honour, and for which I will some day account to you."

In their emotion, the marquis and Gaston forgot the threatened danger.

But Louis was not touched by the affecting scene. "Time presses," he said : "you had better hasten."

"He is right," cried the marquis ; "go, Gaston, go, my son ; and heaven protect the heir of the De Clamerans !"

Gaston slowly got up, and said with an embarrassed air : "Before leaving you, father, I must fulfil a sacred duty. I have not told you everything. I love Valentine, the young girl whose honour I defended this evening."

"Oh !" cried the marquis, thunderstruck, "oh, oh !"

"And I entreat you, father, to ask Madame de La Verberie for her daughter's hand. Valentine will gladly join me abroad, and share my exile."

Gaston stopped, frightened at the effect of his words. The old marquis had become crimson, or rather purple, as if struck by apoplexy.

"Preposterous !" he gasped. "Impossible ! Perfect folly !"

"I love her, father, and have promised her never to marry another."

"Then you will remain a bachelor."

"I shall marry her !" cried Gaston excitedly. "I shall marry her because I have sworn I would, and I will not be so base as to desert her."

"Nonsense !"

"I tell you Mademoiselle de La Verberie must and shall be my wife. It is too late for me to draw back. Even if I no longer loved her, I would still marry her, because she has given herself to me ; because, can't you understand, what was said at the café to-night was true : Valentine is my mistress."

Gaston's confession, forced from him by circumstances, produced a very different impression from that which he had expected. The enraged marquis instantly became cool, and his mind seemed relieved of an immense weight. A wicked joy sparkled in his eyes, as he replied : "Ah, ha ! she yielded to your entreaties, did she ? Heavens ! I am delighted. I congratulate you, Gaston ; they say she is charming, the little wench."

"Sir !" interrupted Gaston indignantly ; "I have told you that I love her, and have promised to marry her. You seem to forget."

"Ta, ta, ta !" cried the marquis, "your scruples are absurd. You know full well that one of her ancestors led one of our girls astray. Now we are quits ! And so she is your mistress—"

"I swear by my mother's memory that Valentine shall be my wife !"

"Do you dare assume that tone towards me ?" cried the exasperated marquis. "Never, understand me clearly, never will I give my consent. You know how dear to me is the honour of our house. Well, I would rather see you tried for murder, and even condemned, than married to this hussey !"

This last word was too much for Gaston. "Then your wish shall be gratified, sir. I will remain here, and be arrested. I care not what becomes of me ! What is life to me without the hope of Valentine ? Take back these jewels ; they are useless now."

A terrible scene would have ensued between the father and son had they not been interrupted by a domestic who rushed into the room, and excitedly exclaimed : "The gendarmes ! here are the gendarmes !"

At this news the old marquis started up, and seemed to forget his gout, which had yielded to more violent emotions. "Gendarmes !" he cried, "in my house, at Clameran ! They shall pay dear for their insolence ! You will help me, will you not, my men ?"

"Yes, yes," answered the servants. "Down with the gendarmes! down with them!"

Fortunately, Louis, during all this excitement, preserved his presence of mind. "To resist would be folly," he said. "Even if we repulsed the gendarmes to-night, they would return to-morrow with reinforcements."

"Louis is right," said the marquis bitterly. "Might is right, as they said in '93. The gendarmes are all powerful. Do they not even have the impertinence to come up to me while I am out shooting, and ask to see my license?—I, a De Clameran, show a license!"

"Where are they?" asked Louis of the servants.

"At the outer gate," answered La Verduze, one of the grooms. "Do you not hear the noise they are making with their sabres, sir?"

"Then Gaston must escape by the garden door."

"It is guarded, sir," said La Verduze in despair, "and the little gate in the park also. There seems to be a regiment of them. They are even stationed along the park walls."

This was only too true. The rumour of Lazet's death had spread like wild-fire throughout the town of Tarascon, and everybody was in a state of excitement. Not only the mounted gendarmes, but a platoon of hussars from the garrison, had been sent in pursuit of the murderer. And at least twenty young men of the town guided them.

"Then," said the marquis, "we are surrounded?"

"Not a single chance of escape," groaned Jean.

"We shall see about that!" cried the marquis. "Ah, we are not the strongest, but we can be the most artful. Attention! Louis, my son, you and La Verduze go down to the stables, and mount the fastest horses; then as quietly as possible station yourselves, you, Louis, at the park gate, and you, La Verduze, at the outer gate. You others, go and post yourselves at either of the gates. Upon the signal I shall give by firing off a pistol, let both gates be instantly opened. Louis and La Verduze must spur on their horses, and do all they can to pass through the gendarmes, who are sure to follow in pursuit."

"I will make them run," said La Verduze.

"Listen. During this time, Gaston, aided by Jean, will scale the park wall, and hasten along the river-bank to the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. He is an old sailor, and devoted to our house. He will take Gaston in his boat; and, when they are once on the Rhone, there is nothing to be feared save heaven. Now go, all of you: do as I have said."

Left alone with his son, the old marquis slipped the jewels into a silk purse, and stretching out his arms towards Gaston said, in broken accents: "Come here, my son, and let me bless you." Gaston hesitated. "Come," insisted the old man, "I must embrace you for the last time: I may never see you again. Save yourself, save your name, Gaston, and then—you know how I love you. Take back these jewels—"

For an instant father and son clung to each other, overpowered by emotion. But the continued noise at the gate now reached their ears. "We must part!" said M. de Clameran. And, taking a pair of small pistols, he handed them to his son, and added with averted eyes: "You must not be captured alive, Gaston!"

Unfortunately Gaston did not immediately hasten to the park wall. He yearned more than ever to see Valentine, and he perceived a possibility of being able to bid her farewell. He could persuade Pilorel to stop the boat when they reached the park of La Verberie. He therefore employed the

few minutes respite that destiny had allowed him in going to his room and placing in the window the signal that would tell Valentine he was coming; and even waited for an answering light.

"Come, M. Gaston," entreated old Jean, who could not understand this strange conduct. "For heaven's sake make haste! your life is at stake!"

At last he came running down the stairs, and had just reached the hall when a pistol-shot, the signal given by the marquis, resounded through the house. The swinging open of the large gate, the rattling of the sabres of the gendarmes, the furious galloping of many horses, and a chorus of loud shouts and angry oaths, were next heard. Leaning against the window of his room, his brow covered with perspiration, the Marquis de Clameran breathlessly awaited the issue of this expedient, upon which depended the life of his eldest son. His measures were excellent. As he had planned, Louis and La Verdure managed to dash out through the gates, one to the right, the other to the left, each one pursued by a crowd of mounted men. Their horses flew like arrows, and kept far ahead of the pursuers. Gaston was as good as saved, when fate, but was it only fate, interfered? Suddenly Louis's horse stumbled, and fell to the ground with his rider under him. Immediately surrounded by the gendarmes, M. de Clameran's second son was easily recognised.

"He is not the murderer!" cried one of the young men of the town. "Let us hurry back, they are trying to deceive us!"

They returned just in time to see, by the uncertain light of the moon peeping from behind a cloud, Gaston climbing the wall.

"There is our man!" exclaimed a corporal. "Keep your eyes open, and gallop after him!"

They spurred their horses, and hastened to the spot where Gaston had jumped from the wall. On a piece of ground at all wooded, or even if it be only hilly, an agile man on foot, if he preserves his presence of mind, can escape a number of horsemen. Now the ground on this side of the park was extremely favourable to Gaston. He found himself in an immense madder-field, and it is well known that this valuable root, having to remain in the ground three years, the furrows are necessarily ploughed very deep. Horses cannot gallop over its uneven surface; indeed, they can scarcely stand steadily upon it. This circumstance brought the gendarmes to a dead halt. Four hussars ventured in the field, but their efforts were useless. Jumping from furrow to furrow, Gaston soon left his pursuers far behind, and reached a vast plantation covered with undergrowth. As his chances of escape increased, the excitement grew more intense. The horsemen urged each other on, and called out every time they saw Gaston run from one clump of trees to another. Being familiar with the country, young De Clameran did not despair. He knew that after the plantation came a field of thistles, and that the two were separated by a wide, deep ditch. He resolved to jump into this ditch, run along the bottom, and climb out at the further end, while the others were still looking for him among the trees. But he had forgotten the rising of the river. Upon reaching the ditch he found it full of water. Discouraged but not disconcerted, he was about to jump across, when three horsemen appeared on the opposite side. They were gendarmes who had ridden round the madder-field and the plantation, knowing they would easily make up for lost time on the level ground of the field of thistles. At the sight of these three men, Gaston stood perplexed. He would certainly be captured

if he attempted to run through the field, at the end of which he could see the cabin of Pilorel, the fisherman. To retrace his steps would be to surrender to the hussars. At a little distance on his right was a small wood, but he was separated from it by a road upon which he heard the sound of horses' hoofs. He would certainly be caught there also. On his left was the surging, foaming river. What was to be done? He felt the circle of which he was the centre fast narrowing around him. Must he, then, fall back upon the pistols, and there, in the midst of the country, hunted by gendarmes like a wild beast, blow his brains out? What a death for a De Clameran! No! He would seize the one chance of salvation left him; a forlorn, desperate, perilous chance, but still a chance—the river. Holding a pistol in either hand, he ran to the edge of a little promontory, projecting a few yards into the Rhone. This cape of refuge was formed by the giant trunk of a fallen tree, which swayed and cracked fearfully under Gaston's weight, as he stood on the further end, and looked back upon his pursuers; there were fifteen of them, some on the right, some on the left, all uttering cries of joy.

"Do you surrender?" called out the corporal of gendarmes.

Gaston did not answer; he was weighing his chances. He was above the park of La Verberie: would he be able to swim there, granting that he was not swept away and drowned the instant he plunged into the angry torrent before him? He pictured Valentine, at that very moment, watching, waiting, and praying for him on the other shore.

"For the second time do you surrender?" cried the corporal.

The unfortunate man did not hear; he was deafened by the waters which were roaring and rushing past him. He was at that supreme moment, with his foot upon the threshold of another world, when a man sees his past life rise before him, and judges himself. Although death stared him in the face, Gaston calmly considered which would be the best spot to take his plunge, and commended his soul to God.

"He will stand there until we go after him," said a gendarme; "so we may as well do so at once."

But Gaston had finished his prayer. He flung his pistols in the direction of the gendarmes: he was ready. He made the sign of the cross, and then, with outstretched arms, plunged into the Rhone. The violence of his spring loosened the few remaining roots of the old tree; it swayed for a moment, turned over, and then rapidly drifted away. The spectators uttered a cry of horror and pity rather than of anger. "That is the end of him," muttered one of the gendarmes; "he is done for; a man can't fight against the Rhone; his body will be washed ashore at Arles to-morrow."

The hussars seemed really grieved at the tragic fate of this brave, handsome, young man, whom a moment before they had pursued so tenaciously. They admired his spirited resistance, his courage, and especially his resignation, for, being armed, he might have sold his life dearly. True French soldiers, their sympathies were now all upon the side of the vanquished, and every man of them would have done all in his power to assist in saving the drowning man, and aiding his escape.

"An ugly piece of work!" grumbled the old sergeant who had command of the hussars.

"Bah!" exclaimed the philosophic corporal, "the Rhone is no worse than the assize-court. Right about my men. The thing that troubles me is the idea of that poor old man who is waiting to hear his son's fate. I would not be the one to tell him what has happened. March!"

XIII.

VALENTINE knew, that fatal evening, that Gaston would have to walk to Tarascon, to cross the Rhone by the suspension bridge which connects Tarascon with Beaucaire, and did not expect to see him until eleven o'clock, the time which they had agreed upon the previous evening. But, happening to look up at the windows of Clameran, long before the appointed hour, she saw lights hurrying to and fro in the different rooms in a most unusual manner. A presentiment of impending misfortune chilled her blood, and almost stopped the beatings of her heart. A secret and imperious voice within her breast told her that something terrible and extraordinary was going on at the château of Clameran. What was it? She could not imagine; but she knew, she felt, that some dreadful misfortune had happened. With her eyes fastened upon the dark mass looming in the distance, she watched the going and coming of the lights, as if their movements would give her a clue to what was taking place within those walls. She even opened her window and listened, as though any tell-tale sound could reach her at such a distance. Alas! she heard nothing but the roar of the angry river. Her anxiety grew more intolerable every moment, when suddenly the well-known, beloved signal appeared in Gaston's window, informing her that her lover was about to swim across the Rhone. She could scarcely believe her eyes, and it was not till the signal had been repeated three times that she answered it. Then, more dead than alive, she hastened with trembling limbs through the park to the river bank. Never had she seen the Rhone so furious. Since Gaston was risking his life in order to see her, she could no longer doubt that something fearful had occurred at Clameran. She fell on her knees, and with clasped hands, and her wild eyes fixed upon the dark waters, besought the pitiless stream to yield up her dear Gaston. Every dark object which she could distinguish floating in the middle of the torrent assumed the shape of a human form. At one time she thought she heard, above the roaring of the water, the terrible, agonized cry of a drowning man. She watched and prayed, but her lover came not.

While the gendarmes and hussars slowly and silently returned to the château of Clameran, Gaston experienced one of those miracles which would seem incredible were they not confirmed by the most convincing proof. When he first plunged into the river, he rolled over five or six times, and was then drawn towards the bottom. In a swollen river the current is not the same at different depths, being much stronger in some places than in others; hence the great danger. Gaston knew it, and guarded against it. Instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles, he held his breath, and let himself go with the flood. It was not till he had been carried some considerable distance that he made a sudden spring which brought him to the surface. Rapidly drifting by him was the old tree. For some seconds he was entangled in a mass of rubbish; an eddy set him free. He did not dream of making for the opposite shore. He determined to land wheresoever he could. With great presence of mind he exerted all his strength and dexterity so as to slowly and carefully take an oblique course, knowing well, however, that there was no hope for him if the current took him crosswise. This fearful current is, moreover, as capricious as it is terrible; which accounts for the strange effects of inundations. According to the

meanderings of the river, it sometimes rushes to the right, and sometimes to the left, sparing one shore and ravaging the other. Gaston, who was familiar with every bend of the river, knew that there was an abrupt turning just below Clameran, and relied upon the eddy formed thereby, to sweep him in the direction of La Verberie. His expectations were not deceived. An oblique current suddenly swept him towards the right bank, and, if he had not been on his guard, would have sunk him. But the eddy did not reach as far as Gaston supposed, and he was still some distance from the shore, when, with the rapidity of lightning, he was swept past the park of La Verberie. As he floated by, he caught a glimpse of a white shadow among the trees: Valentine was waiting for him. It was not till he had been carried a considerable distance that, finding himself nearer the bank, he attempted to land. Feeling a foothold, he twice raised himself, and was each time thrown down by the force of the current. He escaped being swept away by seizing some willow branches, and, clinging to them, climbed up the steep bank. He was safe at last. Without waiting to take breath, he darted off at once in the direction of the park. It was time he arrived. Overcome by the intensity of her emotions, Valentine had fainted, and lay apparently lifeless on the ground. Gaston's kisses aroused her.

"You!" she cried in a tone that revealed all the love she felt for him. "Is it indeed you? Then God heard my prayers, and had pity upon us."

"No, Valentine," he murmured, "God has had no pity."

The sad tones of Gaston's voice convinced her that her presentiment of evil was well-founded. "What new misfortune strikes us now?" she exclaimed. "Why have you thus risked your life—a life far dearer to me than my own? What has happened?"

"This is what has happened, Valentine: our secret is a secret no longer; our love is the jest of the country."

She shrank back, and, burying her face in her hands, moaned piteously. "This," continued Gaston, forgetting everything but his present misery; "this is the result of the blind enmity of our families. Our noble and pure love, which ought to be a glory in the eyes of God and man, has to be concealed, as though it were some evil deed."

"All is known, all is discovered!" murmured Valentine.

In the midst of the angry elements, Gaston had preserved his self-possession; but the heart-broken tones of his beloved Valentine overcame him. "And I was unable," he cried, "to crush the villains who dared to utter your adored name. Ah, why did I only kill two of the scoundrels!"

"You have killed some one, Gaston!"

Valentine's tone of horror restored to Gaston a ray of reason. "Yes," he replied, trying to overcome his emotion; "I have killed two men. It was for that reason I swam across the Rhone. I had to save the honour of my name. Only a short time ago all the gendarmes of the place were pursuing me, I have escaped them, and now I am flying the country."

Valentine struggled to preserve her composure under such unexpected blows. "Where do you hope to fly to?" she asked.

"I know not. Indeed, God only knows where I am to go, and what will become of me. I must assume a false name and a disguise, and try to reach some foreign land which offers a refuge to murderers." Gaston stopped. He expected an answer to this speech. None came, and he resumed with extraordinary vehemence: "And before disappearing, Valentine, I wished to see you, because now, when I am abandoned by every one else, I have relied upon you, and had faith in your

love. A tie unites us, my darling, stronger than all other earthly bonds—the tie of love. Before God you are my wife ; I am yours and you are mine, for life ! Would you let me fly alone, Valentine ? To the pain and toil of exile, to the bitter regrets of a ruined life, could you add the torture of separation ? ”

“Gaston, I implore you—”

“Ah, I knew it,” he interrupted, mistaking the sense of her exclamation ; “I knew you would not let me go alone. I knew your sympathetic heart would long to share the burden of my miseries. This moment effaces the wretched suffering I have endured. Let us fly ! Having our happiness to defend, I fear nothing ; I can brave and conquer all. Come, my Valentine, we will escape, or die together ? This is the long-dreamed-of-happiness ! The glorious future of love and liberty opens before us ! ”

He had worked himself into a state of delirious excitement. He seized Valentine round the waist, and tried to carry her off. But as his exaltation increased, she managed to regain her composure. Gently, and yet with a firmness he had not suspected her capable of, she withdrew herself from his embrace, and said sadly, but resolutely : “What you wish, Gaston, is impossible.”

This cold, inexplicable resistance seemed to confound her lover. “Impossible ? ” he stammered.

“You know me well enough, Gaston, to be convinced that sharing the greatest hardships with you would to me be the height of happiness. But above the pleading of your voice to which I fain would yield, above the voice of my own heart which urges me to follow you, there is another voice—a powerful, imperious one—which bids me stay : the voice of duty.”

“What ! Would you think of remaining here after the horrible affair of to-night, after the scandal that will be spread abroad to-morrow ! ”

“What do you mean ? That I am lost, dishonoured ? Am I any more so to-day than I was yesterday ? Do you think that the jeers and scoffing of the world could make me suffer more than the pangs of my guilty conscience ? I have long since passed judgment upon myself, Gaston ; and, although the sound of your voice and the touch of your hand made me forget all save the bliss of love, no sooner had you gone than I wept tears of shame and remorse.”

Gaston listened motionless, astounded. He seemed to see a new Valentine standing before him, an entirely different woman from the one whose tender soul he thought he knew so well. “And your mother ? ” he murmured.

“It is my duty to her that keeps me here. Do you wish me to prove an unnatural daughter, and desert her now that she is poor, lonely, and friendless, with no one but me to cling to ? Could I abandon her to follow my lover ? ”

“But our enemies will inform her of everything, Valentine ; she will know all.”

“No matter. The dictates of conscience must be obeyed. Ah, why can I not, even at the price of my life, spare her the agony of learning that her only daughter, her Valentine, has disgraced her name ? She may be hard, cruel, pitiless towards me ; but have I not deserved it ? Oh, my only friend, we have been basking in a dream too beautiful to last ! I have long dreaded this awful awakening. Like two weak, credulous fools, we imagined that happiness could exist beyond the pale of duty. Sooner or later stolen joys must be dearly paid for. We must bow our heads, and drink the cup to the dregs.”

This cold reasoning, this sad resignation, was more than Gaston's fiery nature could bear. "Do not talk like that!" he cried. "Can you not feel that the bare idea of your suffering this humiliation drives me mad?"

"Alas! I must expect greater humiliation yet."

"What do you mean, Valentine?"

"Know then, Gaston—" But she stopped short, hesitated, and then added: "Nothing! I know not what I say."

Had Gaston been less excited, he would have suspected some new misfortune beneath Valentine's reticence; but his mind was too full of his one idea. "All hope is not lost," he resumed. "My father is kind-hearted, and was touched by my love and despair. I am sure that my letters, together with the intercession of my brother Louis, will induce him to ask Madame de La Verberie for your hand."

This notion seemed to terrify Valentine. "Heaven forbid!" she exclaimed, "that the marquis should take this rash step!"

"Why, Valentine?"

"Because my mother would reject his offer; because, I must confess it now, she has sworn I shall marry none but a rich man; and your father is not rich."

"Good heavens!" cried Gaston with disgust, "and it is to such a mother that you sacrifice me?"

"She is my mother; that is sufficient. I have not the right to judge her. My duty is to remain with her, and remain I shall."

Valentine's manner showed such determined resolution, that Gaston saw that further prayers would be in vain.

"Alas!" he cried, as he wrung his hands with despair, "you do not love me; you have never loved me!"

"Gaston, Gaston! you do not think what you say!"

"If you loved me," he cried, "you could never, at this moment of separation, have the cruel courage to reason and calculate so coldly. Ah, far different is my love for you. Without you the world is void; to lose you is to die. So let the Rhone take back this life, so miraculously saved; for it is now a burden to me!"

And he would have rushed towards the river, determined to die, had Valentine not held him back. "Is this the way to show your love for me?" she asked.

Gaston was absolutely discouraged. "What is the use of living?" he murmured dejectedly. "What is left to me now?"

"God is left to us, Gaston; and in His hands lies our future."

As a shipwrecked man seizes a rotten plank in his desperation, so Gaston eagerly caught at the word "*future*," as a beacon in the gloomy darkness surrounding him. "Your command shall be obeyed," he cried with sudden enthusiasm. "Away with weakness! Yes, I will live, and struggle, and triumph. Madame de La Verberie wants gold; well, in three years I shall either be rich, or dead." With clasped hands Valentine thanked heaven for this determination, which was more than she had dared hope for. "But," continued Gaston, "before going away I wish to intrust a sacred deposit to your keeping." And drawing the jewels from his pocket and handing them to Valentine, he added: "These jewels belonged to my poor mother; you, alone, are worthy of wearing them. In my thoughts I intended them for you." And as she refused to accept them, "Take them," he insisted, "as a pledge of my return. If I do not come back within three years, you will know that I am dead, and then you must keep them as a

souvenir of him who loved you so fondly." She burst into tears, and took the jewels. "And now," resumed Gaston, "I have a last request to make. Everybody believes me dead, but I cannot let my poor old father remain under this impression. Swear to me that you will go yourself to-morrow morning, and tell him that I am still alive."

"I will tell him," she replied.

Gaston felt that he must now tear himself away before his courage failed him. He enveloped Valentine in a last fond embrace, and started up. "What is your plan of escape?" she asked.

"I shall go to Marseilles, and take refuge in a friend's house until I can procure a passage on board some foreign-bound vessel."

"You must have assistance; I will secure you a guide in whom I have unbounded confidence; old Menoul who lives near us. He owns the boat which he plies on the Rhone."

The lovers passed through the little park gate, of which Gaston had the key, and soon reached the boatman's cabin. He was dozing in his easy-chair by the fireside. When Valentine stood before him with Gaston, the old man jumped up, and kept rubbing his eyes, thinking it must be a dream. "M. Menoul," said Valentine, "M. Gaston is compelled to hide himself; he wants to reach the sea, so that he can embark secretly. Can you take him in your boat as far as the mouth of the Rhone?"

"It is impossible," said the old man shaking his head; "I dare not venture on the river in its present state."

"But, M. Menoul, you would be rendering an immense service to me; would you not venture for my sake?"

"For your sake? certainly I would, Mademoiselle Valentine; I am ready to start." He looked at Gaston, and, seeing his clothes wet and covered with mud, said to him: "Allow me to offer you some clothes of a son of mine who is dead, sir; they will, at least, serve as a disguise: come this way."

In a few minutes old Menoul returned with Gaston, whom no one would have recognised in his sailor dress. Valentine went with them to the place where the boat was moored. While the old man was unfastening it, the disconsolate lovers tearfully embraced each other for the last time. "In three years," cried Gaston, "in three years!"

"Adieu, mademoiselle," interrupted the old boatman; "and you, sir, hold fast, and keep steady." Then with a vigorous shove of the boat-hook he sent the boat into the middle of the stream.

Three days later, thanks to the assistance of old Menoul, Gaston was concealed on board the American three-master, "Tom Jones," Captain Warth, which was to start the next day for Valparaiso.

XIV.

COLD and white like a marble statue, Valentine stood on the river-bank, watching the frail bark which was carrying her lover away. It flew along the Rhone like a bird in a tempest, and after a few seconds only appeared as a black speck in the midst of a heavy fog which hung over the water. Now that Gaston was gone, Valentine had no motive for concealing her despair; she wrung her hands and sobbed as if her heart would break. All her forced calmness, her bravery and hopefulness, were gone. She felt crushed and lost, as if something had been torn from her; as if that swiftly disappearing bark had carried off the better part of herself. For while

Gaston treasured in the bottom of his heart a ray of hope, she felt there was nothing to look forward to but shame and sorrow. The horrible facts which stared her in the face convinced her that happiness in this life was over; the future was worse than blank. She wept and shuddered at the prospect. She slowly retraced her footsteps through the little gate which had so often admitted Gaston; and, as she closed it behind her, she fancied she was placing an impassable barrier between herself and happiness. Before going to her room, Valentine was careful to walk round the château, and examine the windows of her mother's chamber. They were brilliantly lighted, as usual at that hour, for Madame de La Verberie passed a part of the night in reading, and did not rise till late in the morning. Enjoying the comforts of life, which are not expensive in the country, the selfish countess disturbed herself very little about her daughter. Having no fear for her in their isolation, she left her at perfect liberty; and, day and night, Valentine might go and come, and take long walks, without her mother making a remark.

But on this night Valentine feared being seen. She would be called upon to explain the torn, muddy condition of her dress, and what answer could she give? Fortunately she was able to reach her own room without meeting any one. She longed for solitude in order to collect her thoughts, and to pray for strength to withstand the angry storm about to burst over her head. Seated before her little work-table, she took the purse of jewels from her pocket and mechanically examined them. It would be a sweet, sad comfort to wear the simplest of the rings, she thought; but could she? her mother would ask her where it came from. And she would have to deceive her again. She kissed the purse, in memory of Gaston, and then concealed the sacred deposit at the bottom of a drawer. She then remembered that she would have to go to Clameran, to inform the old marquis of the miraculous preservation of his son's life. Blinded by his passion, Gaston did not think, when he requested this service, of the obstacles and dangers to be braved in its performance. But Valentine saw them only too clearly; yet it did not occur to her for an instant to break her promise, or delay to go. At sunrise she dressed herself. When the bell was ringing for early mass, she thought it a good time to start on her errand. The servants were all up, and one of them named Mihonne, who always waited on Valentine, was scrubbing the hall.

"If my mother asks for me," said Valentine to the girl, "tell her I have gone to early mass."

As she often went to church at this hour, there was nothing to be feared so far; Mihonne said nothing. But Valentine knew that she would have a difficulty in returning in time for breakfast, for she would have to walk a league before reaching the bridge, and it was another league thence to Clameran; that is four leagues there and back. She set forth at a rapid pace. The consciousness of performing an extraordinary action, and the feverish anxiety of incurred peril, increased her haste. She forgot fatigue, and that she had worn herself out with weeping all night. In spite of her efforts, however, it was past eight o'clock when she reached the long avenue leading to the main entrance of the château of Clameran. She had only proceeded a few steps along it, when she saw old Jean, the marquis's valet, coming down the path. She stopped and waited for him, and he hastened his steps at sight of her. He looked very much excited, and his eyes were swollen with weeping. To Valentine's surprise, he did not take off his cap to her, but accosted her most rudely.

"Are you going to the château, mademoiselle?"

"Yes."

"If you are going after M. Gaston," continued the servant with an insolent sneer, "you are taking useless trouble. M. Gaston is dead, mademoiselle; he sacrificed himself for a mistress he had."

Valentine turned white at this insult, but took no notice of it. Jean, who expected to see her overcome by the dreadful news, was bewildered and indignant at her composure. "I am going to the château," she resumed quietly, "to speak to the marquis."

Jean stifled a sob, and said: "Then it is not worth while to go any further."

"Why?"

"Because the Marquis de Claméran died at five o'clock this morning."

Valentine leaned against a tree to prevent herself from falling. "Dead!" she gasped.

"Yes," said Jean fiercely, "yes, dead!" A faithful servant of the old regime, Jean shared all the passions, weaknesses, friendships, and enmities of his master. He had a horror of the La Verberies. And now he saw in Valentine the woman who had caused the death of the marquis whom he had served for forty years, and of Gaston whom he worshipped. "I will tell you how he died," continued the bitter old man. "Yesterday evening, when the news reached the marquis that his eldest son was dead, he who was as hardy as an oak dropped down as if struck by lightning. I was there. He beat the air wildly with his hands, and fell without uttering one word. We put him to bed, and M. Louis galloped into Tarascon for a doctor. But the blow had struck too deeply. When Dr. Raget arrived he said there was no hope. At daybreak, the marquis recovered consciousness enough to ask for M. Louis, with whom he remained alone for some minutes. His last words were: 'Father and son on the same day, there will be rejoicing at La Verberie.'"

Valentine might have soothed the faithful servant's sorrow by telling him that Gaston still lived; but she feared it would be indiscreet, and so, unfortunately, she merely said: "Then, I must see M. Louis."

These words seemed to anger Jean the more. "You!" he exclaimed. "You would dare to take such a step, Mademoiselle de La Verberie? What! would you presume to appear before him after what has happened? I will never allow it! And you had best, moreover, take my advice, and return home at once. I will not answer for the tongues of the servants here, when they see you." And, without waiting for an answer, he hurried away.

What could Valentine do? Humiliated and miserable, she could only wearily drag her aching limbs back the way she had so rapidly come, but a short time before. On the road, she met many country people coming from the town, where they had heard of the events of the previous night; and at every step the poor girl was greeted with insulting looks and mocking bows. When she reached La Verberie, she found Mihonne watching for her.

"Ah, mademoiselle," said the girl, "make haste. Madame had a visitor this morning, and ever since she left has been calling out for you. Hurry; but take care what you do, for she is in a violent passion."

Much has been said in favour of the patriarchal manners of our ancestors. Their manners may have been patriarchal years and years ago; but our grandames, very differently to our women now-a-days, had sharp wits, ready

hands, and quick tongues, and were never afraid of letting their actions suit their words which were not always choice. Madame de La Verberie had preserved the manners of the good old times, when grand ladies swore like troopers. When Valentine appeared, she was overwhelmed with coarse epithets and violent abuse. The countess had been informed of everything, with many gross additions added by public scandal. An old dowager, her most intimate friend, had hurried over early in the morning to offer her this poisoned dish of gossip, seasoned with her own pretended condolences. In this sad affair, Madame de La Verberie mourned less over her daughter's loss of reputation than over the ruin of her own projects—projects of arranging a grand marriage for Valentine, and of herself living in luxury the rest of her days. A young girl so compromised would not find it easy to get a husband. It would now be absolutely necessary to keep her two years longer in the country before introducing her into Parisian society. The world must have time to forget this shameful affair.

"You worthless wretch!" cried the countess, red with fury; "is it thus you respect the noble traditions of our family? Up to now it has never been considered necessary to watch the La Verberies; they could take care of their honour: but it was reserved for you to take advantage of your liberty to lower yourself to the level of those harlots who are the disgrace of their sex!"

With a sinking heart, Valentine had foreseen this tirade. She felt that it was only a fitting punishment for her guilty love. Knowing that her mother's indignation was just, she meekly hung her head like a repentant culprit at the bar of justice. But this silence only exasperated the angry countess the more. "Why do you not answer me?" she screamed with a threatening gesture.

"What can I say, mother?"

"Say, miserable girl? Say that they lied when they accused a La Verberie of disgracing her name! Speak, defend yourself!" Valentine mournfully shook her head, but said nothing. "It is true, then!" shrieked the countess, beside herself with rage; "what they said is true?"

"Forgive me, mother," moaned the poor girl; "forgive me."

"What! Forgive you! I have not then been deceived. Forgive you! Do you own it then, you hussy! Good heavens! what blood have you in your veins? Do you not know that some faults should be persistently denied, no matter how glaring the evidence against them? And you are my daughter! Can you not understand that an ignominious confession like this should never be forced from a woman by any human power? But no, you have lovers, and unblushingly avow it. Glory in it, it would be something new!"

"Alas! you are pitiless, mother!"

"Did you have any pity for me, my dutiful daughter? Did it never occur to you that your disgrace might kill me? Ah! many a time, I dare say, you and your lover have laughed at my blind confidence. For I had confidence in you as in myself. I believed you to be as chaste and pure as when I watched you lying in your cradle. And it has come to this: drunken men make a jest of your name in the wine shops, then fight about you, and kill each other. I intrusted to you the honour of our name, and what have you done with it? You have given it to the first comer!" This was too much for Valentine. The words, "first comer," wounded her pride more than all the other abuse heaped upon her. She tried to protest against this unmerited insult. "Ah, I have made a mistake. Your lover

is not the first comer," said the countess. "With the number you had to choose from, you must fix on the heir of our enemies of a hundred years, Gaston de Clameran. A coward, who publicly boasted of your favours; a wretch, who tried to avenge himself for the heroism of our ancestors by ruining you and me—an old woman and a child!"

"No, mother, that is false. He loved me, and, had he dared hope for your consent—"

"He would have married you? Ah! never. I would rather see you fall lower than you are, even to the gutter, than know you to be the wife of such a man!" Thus the countess expressed her hatred very much in the same terms as the old marquis had used to his son. "Besides," she added, with a ferocity which only a woman is capable of, "besides, your lover is drowned, and the old marquis is dead, so I have been told. God is just; we are avenged."

Old Jean's words, "There will be rejoicing at La Verberie," rung in Valentine's ears as she saw the countess's eyes sparkle with malignant joy. This was the crowning blow for the unfortunate young girl. For half an hour she had been exerting all her strength to bear up against her mother's cruel violence; but her physical endurance was not equal to the task. She turned, if possible, paler, and with half-closed eyes extended her arms as though to find some support, and fell, striking her head against a side table. It was with dry eyes that the countess beheld her daughter stretched at her feet. Her vanity was deeply wounded, but no other emotion disturbed her. Her's was a heart so full of anger and hatred that there was no room for any noble sentiment. Seeing, however, that Valentine remained unconscious, she rang the bell; and the affrighted maid-servants, who were trembling in the passage at the loud and angry tones of the voice they all dreaded, came running in.

"Carry mademoiselle to her room," she ordered; "lock her in, and bring me the key."

The countess intended keeping Valentine a close prisoner for a long time. She well knew the mischievous, gossiping propensities of country people, who, from mere idleness, indulge in limitless scandal. A poor fallen girl must either leave the place, or drink to the very dregs the chalice of premeditated humiliation and brutal irony. Each one delights in casting a stone at her. But the countess's plans were destined to be baffled. The servants came to tell her that Valentine had recovered consciousness, but seemed to be very ill. She replied that it was all pretence; whereupon Mihonne insisted upon her going up and judging for herself. She unwillingly went to her daughter's room, and perceived that something serious was the matter. However, she betrayed no apprehension, but sent to Tarascon for Dr. Raget, who was the oracle of the neighbourhood; it was he who had been called in to see the Marquis de Clameran. Dr. Raget was one of those men who leave a blessed memory, which lives long after their departure from this world. Intelligent and noble-hearted, he devoted himself to his art; wealthy, he never demanded to be paid for his services. At all hours of the night and day, his grey horse and old cabriolet might be seen along the roads, with a hamper of wine and soup under the seat for his poorer patients. He was a little, bald-headed man of fifty, with a quick, bright eye, and pleasant face. The servant fortunately found him at home, and brought him back with him. On beholding Valentine, the doctor's face assumed a most serious expression. Endowed with profound perspicacity, quickened by practice, he studied the young girl and her mother alternately; and the penetrating

gaze which he fixed on the old countess so disconcerted her that she felt her wrinkled face turning very red.

"This child is very ill," he said, at length. And as Madame de La Verberie made no reply, he added : "I desire to remain alone with her for a few minutes."

The countess dared not resist the authority of a man of Dr. Raget's character and reputation, and retired to the next room, apparently calm, but in reality disturbed by the most gloomy forebodings. At the end of half an hour—it seemed a century—the doctor entered the room where she was waiting. He, who had witnessed so much suffering and misery, appeared deeply affected.

"Well?" asked the countess.

"You are a mother, madame," he answered sadly—"that is to say your heart is full of indulgence and pardon. Summon all your courage. Mademoiselle Valentine will soon become a mother."

"The worthless creature ! I feared as much."

The doctor was shocked at the dreadful expression of the countess's eye. He laid his hand on her arm, and giving her a penetrating look, beneath which she instantly quailed, he added : "And the child must live."

The doctor's suspicions were correct. A dreadful idea had flashed across Madame de La Verberie's mind—the idea of destroying this child which would be a living proof of Valentine's sin. Feeling that her evil intention was divined, the proud, stern woman's eyes fell beneath the doctor's obstinate gaze. "I do not understand you, Dr. Raget," she murmured.

"But I know what I mean, madame ; and I simply wished to tell you that a crime does not obliterate a fault."

"Doctor !"

"I merely say what I think, madame. If I was mistaken in my impression, so much the better for you. At present, your daughter's condition is serious, but not dangerous. Excitement and distress of mind have unstrung her nerves, and she is now in a high fever, which I hope soon to allay."

The countess saw that the old doctor's suspicions were not dispelled ; so she thought she would try maternal anxiety, and said : "At least, doctor, you can assure me that the dear child's life is not in danger?"

"No, madame," answered Dr. Raget, with cutting irony, "your maternal tenderness need not be alarmed. All the poor child needs is rest of mind, which you alone can give her. A few kind words from you will do her more good than all my prescriptions. But remember, madame, that the least shock or nervous excitement will produce the most fatal consequences."

"I must confess," said the countess, hypocritically, "that I was unable to control my anger upon first hearing that my darling child had fallen a victim to a vile seducer."

"But now that the first shock is over, madame, being a mother and a Christian, you will do your duty. My duty is to save your daughter and her child, and I will do so. I will call to-morrow."

Madame de La Verberie had no idea of letting the doctor go off in this way. She motioned him to stay, and, without reflecting that she was betraying herself, exclaimed : "Do you pretend to say, sir, that you will prevent my taking every means to conceal the terrible misfortune that has fallen upon me? Do you wish our shame to be made public—to make us the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood?"

The doctor remained a moment without answering ; the condition of

affairs was serious. "No, madame," he at length replied; "I cannot prevent your leaving La Verberie—that would be overstepping my duty; but I must hold you to account for the child. You are at liberty to go where you please; but you must give me proof of the child's being alive, or at least that no attempt was made against its life."

After uttering these threatening words he left the house, and it was in good time, for the countess was choking with suppressed rage. "Insolent upstart!" she cried, "to presume to dictate to a woman of my rank! Ah, if I were not completely at his mercy!" But she was in his power, and she knew well enough that she must for ever bid adieu to all her ambitious plans. No more hopes of luxury, of a millionaire son-in-law, of splendid carriages, rich dresses, and charming card parties, where she could gamble to her heart's content. She would have to die as she had lived, poor, neglected, condemned to a life of privation, all the harder to bear as she would no longer have a brighter future to look forward to. And it was Valentine who brought this misery upon her. This reflection aroused all her inherent bitterness, and she felt for her daughter one of those implacable hatreds which, instead of becoming appeased, are strengthened by time. She wished she could see her lying dead before her, and the accursed infant as well. But she remembered the doctor's threatening look, and dared not attempt anything. She even forced herself to go and say a few forgiving words to Valentine, and then left her to the care of the faithful Mignon.

Poor Valentine! She had suffered so much that she had lost all power of action. She was, however, getting better. She felt that dull, heavy sensation, almost free from pain, which always follows violent mental or physical suffering. When she was able to reflect, she thought to herself: "Well, it is over; my mother knows everything. I have no longer her anger to fear, and must trust to time for her forgiveness." This was the secret which Valentine had been unwilling to reveal to Gaston, because she felt certain that he would refuse to leave her if he knew it. But she wished him to escape; and duty at the same time bade her remain. Even now she did not regret having done so.

The only thought which distressed her was Gaston's danger. Had he succeeded in embarking! How could she find out? For two days the doctor had allowed her to get up; but she could not possibly walk as far as old Menoul's cabin. Happily, the devoted old boatman was intelligent enough to anticipate her wishes. Hearing that the young lady at the chateau was very ill, he set about devising some means of informing her of her friend's safety. He went to La Verberie several times on pretended errands, and finally succeeded in seeing Valentine. They were not alone, so he could not speak to her; but he made her understand by a significant look that Gaston was out of danger. This knowledge contributed more towards Valentine's recovery than all the medicines administered by the doctor, who, after visiting her daily for six weeks, at length pronounced his patient sufficiently strong to bear the fatigues of a journey. The countess had waited with the greatest impatience for this decision. In order to prevent any delay, she had already realised half of her capital at a loss, and said to herself that the sum thus raised, some twenty-five thousand francs, would suffice for all contingent expenses. For a fortnight she had been calling on all her friends, saying that as soon as her daughter had recovered her health she meant to take her to England to visit a rich old relation, who had expressed a wish to see her.

Valentine looked forward to this journey with terror, and shuddered when her mother said to her, on the evening that the doctor gave her permission to set out: "We shall start the day after to-morrow." Only one day left! And Valentine had been unable to let Louis de Clameran know that his brother was still living. In this extremity she was obliged to confide in Mihonne, and sent her with a letter to Louis. But the faithful servant had a useless walk. The château of Clameran was deserted; all the servants had been dismissed, and M. Louis, whom they now called the marquis, had gone away.

At last they started. Madame de La Verberie, feeling that she could trust Mihonne, decided to take her with them, after making her swear eternal secrecy. It was in a little village near London that the countess, under the assumed name of Mrs. Wilson, took up her abode with her daughter and maid-servant. She selected England, because she had lived there a long time, and was well acquainted with the manners and habits of the people, and spoke their language as well as she did her own. She had kept up an acquaintance with some of the English nobility, and often dined and went to the theatre with her friends in London. On these occasions she always took the humiliating precaution of locking Valentine in her room. It was in their sad, solitary house, one night in the month of May, that the son of Valentine de La Verberie was born. He was taken to the parish priest, and christened Valentin Raoul Wilson. The countess had prepared everything, and for five hundred pounds had engaged an honest farmer's wife to bring the child up as her own, and, when old enough, have him taught a trade. Little Raoul was handed over to her a few hours after his birth. The good woman thought him the child of an English lady, and there seemed no probability that he would ever discover the secret of his birth. Restored to consciousness, Valentine asked for her child. She yearned to clasp it to her bosom; but the cruel countess was pitiless. "Your child!" she cried, "I do not know what you mean; you must be dreaming; you are mad!" And as Valentine persisted, she replied: "Your child is safe, and will want for nothing; let that suffice. You must forget what has happened, as you would forget a painful dream. The past must be wiped out for ever. You know me well enough to understand that I mean to be obeyed."

The moment had come when Valentine ought in some degree to have resisted the countess's continually increasing tyranny. She had the idea, but not the courage to do so. If, on one side, she saw the dangers of almost culpable resignation—for she, too, was a mother!—on the other she felt crushed by the consciousness of her guilt. She yielded; and surrendered herself for ever into the hands of a mother whose conduct she refrained from questioning, to escape the necessity of condemning it. So much suffering, so many regrets and internal struggles, for a long time delayed her recovery, but towards the end of June, the countess took her back to La Verberie. This time the mischief-makers and gossips were not so sharp as usual. The countess went about, complaining of the bad success of her trip to England, and was able to assure herself that no one suspected her real reason for the journey. Only one man, Dr. Raget, knew the truth; and, although Madame de La Verberie hated him from the bottom of her heart, she did him the justice to feel sure that he would not prove indiscreet.

Her first visit was paid to him. When he entered the room, she abruptly threw on the table the official documents which she had procured especially

for this purpose. "These will prove to you, sir, that the child is living, and well cared for at a cost that I can ill afford."

"These are perfectly correct, madame," he replied, after an attentive examination of the papers, "and, if your conscience does not reproach you, of course I have nothing to say."

"My conscience reproaches me with nothing, sir."

The old doctor shook his head, and gazing searchingly into her eyes, retorted: "Can you say that you have not been harsh, even to cruelty?"

She turned away her head, and, assuming her grand air, answered: "I have acted as a woman of my rank should act; and I am surprised to find in you an advocate of misconduct."

"Ah, madame," said the doctor, "it is your place to show kindness to the poor girl. What indulgence do you expect from strangers towards your unhappy daughter, when you, her mother, are so pitiless?"

Such plain-spoken truths were more than the countess cared to hear, and she rose to leave. "Is that all that you have to say to me, Dr. Raget?" she asked haughtily.

"Yes, madame; I have done. My only object was to spare you eternal remorse."

The good doctor was mistaken in his idea of Madame de La Verberie's character. She was utterly incapable of feeling remorse; but she suffered cruelly when her selfish vanity was wounded, or her comfort disturbed. She resumed her old mode of living, but, having disposed of a part of her income, found it difficult to make both ends meet. This furnished her with an inexhaustible text for complaint; and at every meal she reproached Valentine most unmercifully. She seemed to forget her own command, that the past should be buried in oblivion, and constantly recurred to it for food for her anger; a day seldom passed, without her saying to Valentine: "Your conduct has ruined us."

One day her daughter could not refrain from replying: "I suppose you would have forgiven me, had it enriched us." But these revolts on Valentine's part were rare, although her life was a series of tortures inflicted with most refined cruelty. Even the memory of Gaston had become a suffering. Perhaps, discovering the uselessness of her sacrifice, of her courage, and her devotion to what she had considered her duty, she regretted not having followed him. What had become of him? Why had he not contrived to send her a letter, a word to let her know that he was still alive? Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps he had forgotten her. He had sworn to return a rich man before three years had passed. Would he ever return? There was a risk in his returning under any circumstances. His disappearance had not put an end to the terrible affair at Tarascon. He was supposed to be dead; but, as there was no positive proof of his death, and his body could not be found, justice was compelled to listen to the clamour of public opinion. The case was brought before the assize court; and Gaston de Clameran was contumaciously sentenced to several years' imprisonment. As to Louis de Clameran, no one knew positively what had become of him. Some people said he was leading a life of reckless extravagance at Paris. Informed of these facts by her faithful Mignon, Valentine became more hopeless than ever. Vainly did she question the dreary future; no ray appeared upon the dark horizon of her life. All her energy was gone; and she finally reached that state of passive resignation peculiar to people who are constantly oppressed.

In this miserable way, four years passed since the fatal evening when

Gaston had escaped in old Menoul's boat. Madame de La Verberie had spent these four years most unprofitably. Seeing that she could not live upon her income, and having too much false pride to sell her land, which was so badly managed that it did not even bring her in two per cent, she resigned herself to borrowing and spent her capital with her income. As in such matters, it is only the first step that costs, the countess soon made rapid strides, saying to herself, like the late Marquis de Clameran: "After me, the deluge!" She no longer thought of anything but taking her ease. She had frequent "at homes," and paid many visits to the neighbouring towns of Nîmes and Avignon; she sent to Paris for the most elegant toilets, and indulged her taste for good living. She allowed herself all the luxury that she had hoped to obtain by the acquisition of a rich son-in-law. Great sorrows require consolation! The first year after she returned from London, she did not hesitate to treat herself to a horse; it was rather old, to be sure, but, when harnessed to a second-hand carriage bought on credit at Beaucaire, made quite a good appearance. She would quiet her conscience, which occasionally reproached her for this constant extravagance, by saying: "I am so unhappy!" The unhappiness was that this seeming luxury cost her dear, very dear. After having sold the rest of her bonds, the countess first mortgaged the estate of La Verberie, and then the château itself. And in less than four years she owed more than forty thousand francs, and was unable even to pay the interest of her debt.

She was racking her mind to discover some means of escape from her difficulties, when chance came to her rescue. For some time a young engineer, employed in surveys along the Rhone, had made the village close to La Verberie the centre of his operations. Being handsome, agreeable, and of polished manners, he had been warmly welcomed by the neighbouring society, and the countess frequently met him at the houses of her friends where she went to play cards of an evening. This young engineer was named André Fauvel. The first time he met Valentine he was struck by her beauty, and after once looking into her large, melancholy eyes, his admiration deepened into love, though he had not even spoken to her. He was well off; a splendid career was open to him; he was free; and he swore that Valentine should be his. It was to an old friend of Madame de La Verberie, as noble as a Montmorency and as poor as Job, that he first confided his matrimonial plans. With the precision of a graduate of the polytechnic school, he enumerated all his qualifications for being a model son-in-law. For a long time the old lady listened to him without interruption; but, when he had finished, she did not hesitate to tell him that his pretensions were most presumptuous. What! he, a man of no pedigree, a Fauvel, a common surveyor, to aspire to the hand of a La Verberie! After having enumerated all the superior advantages of that superior order of beings, the nobility, she condescended to take a common-sense view of the case, and said: "However, you may succeed. The poor countess owes money in every direction; scarcely a day passes without the bailiffs calling upon her; so that, you understand, if a rich suitor appeared, and agreed to her terms respecting the settlements—well, well, there is no knowing what might happen."

André Fauvel was young; the old lady's insinuations seemed to him odious. On reflection, however, when he had studied the character of the nobility of the neighbourhood, who were rich in nothing but prejudices, he clearly saw that pecuniary considerations alone would be strong enough to induce the proud Countess de La Verberie to grant him her daughter's

hand. This certainty ended his hesitations, and he turned his whole attention to devising a plan for presenting his claim. He did not find this an easy thing to accomplish. To go in quest of a wife with her purchase-money in his hand, was repugnant to his feelings, and contrary to his ideas of delicacy. But he knew no one who could undertake the matter for him, and his love was strong enough to make him swallow his repugnance. The occasion so anxiously awaited, to explain his intentions, soon presented itself.

One day as he entered a hotel at Beaucaire to dine, he saw Madame de La Verberie about to seat herself at the table. He blushed deeply, and asked permission to sit beside her, which was granted him with a most encouraging smile. Did the countess suspect the love of the young engineer? Had she been warned by her friend? Perhaps so. At any rate, without giving André time to gradually approach the subject weighing on his mind, she began to complain of the hard times, the scarcity of money, and the grasping meanness of the tradespeople. The truth is, she had come to Beaucaire to borrow money, and had found every cash-box closed against her; and her lawyer had advised her to sell her land for what it would bring. Anger joined to that secret instinct of the situation of affairs which is the sixth sense of a woman, loosened her tongue, and made her more communicative to this comparative stranger, than she had ever been to her bosom friends. She explained to him the horror of her situation, her present needs, her anxiety for the future, and above all, her great distress at not being able to marry off her beloved daughter. André listened to these complaints with becoming commiseration, but in reality he was delighted. Without giving her time to finish her tale, he began to state what he called his view of the matter. He said that, although he sympathised deeply with the countess, he could not account for her uneasiness about her daughter. What? Could she be disturbed at having no dowry for her? Why, the rank and beauty of Mademoiselle Valentine were a fortune in themselves, of which any man might be proud. He knew more than one man who would esteem himself only too happy if Mademoiselle Valentine would accept his name, and confer upon him the sweet duty of relieving her mother from all anxiety and care. Finally, he did not think the situation of the countess's affairs nearly so desperate as she imagined. How much money would be necessary to pay off the mortgages upon La Verberie? About forty thousand francs, perhaps? Indeed! That was but a mere trifle. Besides, this sum would not be a gift from the son-in-law, but only a loan, because the estate would be his in the end, and greatly increased in value. A man, too, worthy of Valentine's love could never let his wife's mother want for the comforts and luxuries due to a lady of her age, rank, and misfortunes. He would be only too glad to offer her a sufficient income, not only to provide comfort, but even luxury.

As André spoke in a tone too earnest to be assumed, it seemed to the countess that a celestial dew was dropping upon her pecuniary wounds. Her countenance was radiant with joy, her fierce little eyes beamed with the most encouraging tenderness, her thin lips were wreathed in the most friendly smiles. One thought alone disturbed the young engineer. "Does she understand me? Does she think I'm serious?" he wondered. She certainly did, as her subsequent remarks proved. "Alas!" she sighed, "forty thousand francs will not save La Verberie; the principal and interest of the debt amount to at least sixty thousand.

"Oh, either forty or sixty thousand is nothing worth speaking of."

"Then my son-in-law, the phoenix we are supposing, would he have the forethought to provide for my requirements?"

"I should fancy he would be delighted to add four thousand francs to the income you derive from your estate."

The countess did not reply at once, she was calculating. "Four thousand francs is not much," she said after a pause. "Everything is so dear in this part of the country! But with six thousand francs—yes, six thousand francs would make me happy!"

The young man thought that her demands were becoming excessive, but with the generosity of an ardent lover, he replied: "The son-in-law of whom we are speaking would not be very devoted to Mademoiselle Valentine, if the paltry sum of two thousand francs caused him to hesitate."

"You promise too much!" murmured the countess. A sudden objection, however, occurred to her. "But this imaginary son-in-law," she remarked, "must be possessed of the means to fulfil his promises. I have my daughter's happiness too much at heart to give her to a man who did not produce—what do you call them?—securities, guarantees."

"Decidedly," thought Fauvel with mortification, "we are making a bargain." Then he added aloud: "Of course, your son-in-law would bind himself in the marriage contract to—"

"Never!—sir, never! Think of the impropriety of the thing! What would the world say?"

"Excuse me, it would be stated that it was the interest of a sum received from you."

"Ah! yes, that might do very well."

The countess insisted upon seeing André home in her carriage. During the drive, no definite plan was agreed upon between them; but they understood each other so well, that, when the countess set the young engineer down at his own door, she invited him to dinner the next day, and held out her skinny hand, which André kissed with devotion as he thought of Valentine's pretty eyes. When Madame de La Verberie returned home, the servants were dumb with astonishment at her good humour; they had not seen her in this happy frame of mind for years. And her day's work was of a nature to elevate her spirits: she had been most unexpectedly raised from a very difficult position to affluence. She, who boasted of such proud sentiments, never perceived the shame of the transaction nor the infamy of her conduct. "An annuity of six thousand francs," said she to herself, "and a thousand crowns from the estate, that makes nine thousand francs a year! My daughter will live in Paris after she is married, and I can go and see my dear children without expense." At this price she would have sold not only one but three daughters, if she had possessed them. But suddenly her blood ran cold at a sudden thought which crossed her mind: "Would Valentine consent?"

Her anxiety to set her mind at rest sent her straightway to her daughter's room. She found Valentine reading by the light of a flickering candle. "My daughter," she said abruptly, "a young man of whom I approve has demanded your hand in marriage, and I have promised it to him."

At this startling announcement, Valentine started up—"Impossible!" she murmured, "impossible!"

"And why, if you please?"

"Did you tell him, mother, what I am? Did you own—"

"Your past folly? No, thank heavens! and I hope you will have the good sense to keep silent on the subject."

Although Valentine's spirit was completely crushed by her mother's tyranny, her sense of honour revolted at the idea. "You certainly would not wish me to marry an honest man, mother, without confessing to him everything connected with the past? I could never practise a deception so base."

The countess felt very much like flying into a passion; but she knew that threats would be of no avail in this instance, where resistance would be a matter of conscience with her daughter. Instead of commanding, she entreated. "Poor child," she said, "my poor dear Valentine, if you only knew the dreadful state of our affairs you would not talk in this way. Your folly commenced our ruin; to-day it is complete. Do you know that our creditors threaten to turn us out of La Verberie? Then what will become of us, my poor child? Must I in my old age go begging from door to door? We are utterly lost, and this marriage is our only hope of salvation."

These tearful entreaties were followed by plausible arguments. The dear countess made use of strange and subtle theories. What she formerly regarded as a monstrous crime, she now spoke of as a peccadillo. According to her, girls in Valentine's position were to be met with every day. She could understand, she said, her daughter's scruples if there were any danger of the past being brought to light; but she had taken such precautions, that there was no fear of that. Would it make her love her husband any the less? No. Would he be less happy? No. Then that being so, why hesitate? Shocked, bewildered, Valentine asked herself if this was really her mother, the haughty woman who had always been such a worshipper of honour and duty, who now contradicted every word she had uttered during her life! Valentine could not understand the sudden change. But she would have understood it, had she known to what base deeds a mind blinded by selfishness and vanity can lend itself. The countess's subtle arguments and shameful sophistry neither moved nor convinced her; but she had not the courage to resist the tearful entreaties of that mother, who ended by falling on her knees, and with clasped hands imploring her child to save her. Violently agitated, distracted by a thousand conflicting emotions, daring neither to refuse nor to promise, fearing the consequences of a decision thus forced from her, the unhappy girl begged her mother to grant her a few hours to reflect.

Madame de La Verberie dared not refuse this request, and acquiesced.

"I will leave you my daughter," she said, "and I trust your heart will tell you how to decide between a useless confession, and your mother's salvation." With these words she left the room, indignant but hopeful.

And she had grounds for hope. Placed between two obligations equally sacred, equally binding, but diametrically opposed, Valentine's troubled mind could no longer clearly discern the path of duty. Could she reduce her mother to want and misery? Could she basely deceive the confidence and love of an honourable man? However she decided, her future life would be one of suffering and remorse. Alas! why had she not a wise and kind adviser to point out the right course to pursue, and assist her in struggling against evil influences? Why had she not that gentle, discreet friend who had helped her in her first misfortunes, old Dr. Raget? Formerly, the memory of Gaston had been her guiding star; but now this far-off memory was nothing but a sort of vanishing dream. In romance we meet with heroines of life-long constancy; real life produces few such miracles. For a long time, Valentine's mind had been filled with the image of Gaston. As

the hero of her dreams, she dwelt fondly on his memory ; but the mists of time had gradually dimmed the brilliancy of her idol, which was now no more than a cold relic at the bottom of her heart. When she arose the next morning, pale and weak from a sleepless, tearful night, she was almost resolved to confess everything ; but when the evening came, and she found herself in the company of André Fauvel, and in the presence of her mother's alternately threatening and supplicating glances, her courage failed her. She would say to herself : " I will tell him." But later on she added : " I will wait till to-morrow." The countess saw all these struggles, but was not made uneasy by them. She knew by experience, that when a painful duty is put off it is never performed. There was, perhaps, some excuse for Valentine in the horror of her situation. Perhaps, unknown to herself, she felt a faint hope arise within her. Any marriage, even an unhappy one, offered the prospect of a change, of a new life, a relief from the insupportable suffering she was then enduring. Sometimes, in her ignorance of human life, she imagined that time and close intimacy would make it almost easy for her to confess her terrible fault, and that André would pardon her and marry her all the same, since he loved her so much. That he sincerely loved her, she knew full well. It was not the impetuous passion of Gaston, with its excitements and terrors, but a calm, steady, and perhaps more lasting affection, obtaining a sort of blissful rest in its legitimacy and constancy.

Thus Valentine gradually became accustomed to André's presence, and was surprised into feeling very happy at the constant delicate attentions and affectionate looks that he lavished upon her. She did not feel any love for him yet ; but a separation would have distressed her deeply. During the courtship, the countess's conduct was a masterpiece. She suddenly ceased arguing and importuning, and with tearful resignation said she would not attempt to influence her daughter's decision ; but she went about sighing and groaning as if she were on the eve of starving to death. She also made arrangements for being tormented by the bailiffs. Distress-warrants and legal notices poured in at La Verberie, and she would show Valentine all these documents, saying, " God grant we may not be driven from the home of our ancestors before your marriage, my darling ! " Knowing that her presence was sufficient to freeze any confession on her daughter's lips, she never left her alone with André. " Once married," she thought, " they can settle the matter to please themselves." She was as impatient as André, and hastened the preparations for the wedding. She gave Valentine no opportunity for reflection. She kept her constantly busy, either in driving to town to purchase some article of dress, or in paying visits.

At last the eve of the wedding-day found the countess hopeful, though oppressed with anxiety, like the gambler playing for a high stake. On this evening, for the first time, Valentine found herself alone with the man who was to become her husband. It was twilight, and she was sitting in the drawing-room, miserable and trembling, anxious to unburden her mind, when André entered. Seeing that she was agitated, he pressed her hand, and gently begged her to tell him the cause of her sorrow. " Am I not your best friend," he said, " and ought I not to be the confidant of your troubles, if you have any ? Why these tears, my darling ? "

At this moment she was on the point of confessing everything. But suddenly she perceived the scandal that would result, the pain she would cause André, and her mother's anger ; she saw her own future life ruined—she exclaimed, like all young girls when the eventful moment draws near :

"I am afraid." Imagining that she was merely disturbed by some vague fears, he tried to console and reassure her; but he was surprised to find that his affectionate words only seemed to increase her distress. But already Madame de La Verberie came to interrupt them: they were wanted to sign the marriage contract. André Fauvel was left in ignorance.

On the morrow, a lovely spring day, André Fauvel and Valentine de La Verberie were married at the village church. Early in the morning, the château was filled with the bride's friends, who came, according to custom, to assist at her wedding toilet. Valentine forced herself to appear calm, even smiling; but her face was whiter than her veil—her heart was torn by remorse. She felt as though the sad truth were written upon her brow, and that her white dress was but a bitter irony, a galling humiliation. She shuddered when her most intimate friend placed the wreath of orange-blossom upon her head. It seemed to her that this emblem of purity would burn her. It did not do so, but one of the wire stems of the flowers, badly covered, scratched her forehead which bled a great deal, and a drop of blood fell upon her dress. What an evil omen! Valentine almost fainted. But presages are deceitful, as it proved with Valentine; for a year after her marriage she was, according to report, the happiest of wives. Happy! yes, she would have been completely so could she only have forgotten the past. André adored her. He had gone into business, and everything succeeded with him. But he wished to be immensely rich, not for himself, but for the wife he loved, whom he longed to surround with every luxury. Thinking her the most lovely, he wished to see her the most adorned.

Eighteen months after her marriage, Madame Fauvel had a son. But, alas! neither this child, nor a second son, born a year after, could make her forget the other one—the poor, forsaken babe who, for a sum of money, a stranger had consented to receive. Loving her children passionately, and bringing them up like the sons of princes, she would murmur to herself, "Who knows if the abandoned one has even bread to eat?" If she had only known where he was; if she had only dared inquire!—but she was afraid. Sometimes, too, she would be uneasy about Gaston's jewels, constantly fearing that their hiding-place would be discovered. Other times she would say to herself: "I may as well be tranquil; misfortune has forgotten me." Poor deluded woman! Misfortune is a visitor who sometimes delays his visits, but always comes in the end.

XV.

LOUIS DE CLAMERAN, the second son of the marquis, was one of those self-controlled men, who beneath a cool, careless manner, conceal a fiery temperament, and ungovernable passions. All sorts of extravagant ideas had begun to ferment in his disordered brain, long before the occurrence which decided the destiny of the De Clameran family. Apparently occupied in the pursuit of pleasure, this precocious hypocrite longed for a larger field in which to indulge his evil inclinations, secretly cursing the stern necessity which chained him down to this dreary country life, and the old château, which to him was more gloomy than a prison, and as lifeless as the grave. This existence, dragged out in the country and the small neighbouring towns, was too monotonous for his restless nature. The paternal authority, though gently exercised, exasperated his rebellious temper. He thirsted for independence, riches, excitement, pleasure, and the unknown.

Louis did not love his father, and he hated his brother Gaston. The old marquis, in his culpable thoughtlessness, had kindled this burning envy in the heart of his second son. A strict observer of traditional rights, he had always declared that the eldest son of a noble house should inherit all the family possessions, and that he intended to leave Gaston his entire fortune. This flagrant injustice and favouritism inspired Louis with envious hatred for his brother. Gaston always said that he would never consent to profit by this paternal partiality, but would share equally with his brother. Judging others by himself, Louis placed no faith in this assertion, which he called an ostentatious affectation of generosity. Although this hatred was unsuspected by the marquis and Gaston, it was betrayed by acts significant enough to attract the attention of the servants. They were so fully aware of Louis's sentiments towards his brother, that, when the latter was prevented from escaping because of the stumbling horse, they refused to believe it an accident, and muttered under their breath the word: "Fratricide!" A deplorable scene took place between Louis and Jean, who was allowed, on account of his fifty years' faithful service, to take liberties which he sometimes abused by making rough speeches to his superiors.

"It is a great pity," said the old servant, "that a skilful rider like yourself should have fallen at the very moment when your brother's safety depended upon your good horsemanship. *La Verdure* did not fall."

At this broad insinuation, Louis turned pale, and threateningly exclaimed: "You insolent scoundrel, what do you mean?"

"You know well enough what I mean, sir," the old man replied significantly.

"I do not know! Explain yourself."

The servant only answered by a meaning look, which so incensed Louis, that he rushed towards him with upraised whip, and would have beaten him unmercifully, had not the other servants interfered, and dragged Jean from the spot. This altercation occurred while Gaston was in the madder-field trying to escape his pursuers. After a while, the gendarmes and hussars returned, with slow tread and sad faces, and announced that Gaston de Clameran had plunged into the Rhone, and was most certainly drowned. This melancholy news was received with groans and tears by every one save Louis, who remained calm and unmoved—not a single muscle of his face quivered; but his eyes sparkled with triumph. A secret voice cried within him: "Now you are assured of the family possessions, and a marquis's coronet." He was no longer the poverty-stricken younger son, but the sole heir of the De Clamerans.

The corporal of the gendarmes had said: "I would not be the one to tell the poor old man that his son is drowned."

Louis felt none of the tender-hearted scruples of the brave old soldier. He instantly went to his father's sick-room, and said, in a firm voice: "Between disgrace and death, my brother has chosen: he is dead."

Like a sturdy oak stricken by lightning, the marquis tottered and fell when these fatal words sounded in his ears. The doctor soon arrived, but, alas! only to say that science was of no avail. Towards daybreak, Louis, without a tear, received his father's last sigh. Louis was now the master. All the unjust precautions taken by the marquis to elude the law, and insure beyond dispute the possession of his entire fortune to his eldest son, turned against him. By means of a fraudulent deed of trust drawn by his dishonest lawyer, M. de Clameran had disposed everything so that, on the day of his death, every farthing he owned would be Gaston's. It was Louis

who benefited by this precaution. He came into possession without even being called upon for the certificate of his brother's death. He was now Marquis de Clameran; he was free, he was comparatively rich. He who had never had twenty-five crowns in his pocket at a time, now found himself the possessor of close upon two hundred thousand francs. This sudden and most unexpected fortune so completely turned his head, that he forgot his skilful dissimulation. His demeanour at the funeral of the marquis attracted general notice. He followed the coffin, with his head bowed down and his face buried in a handkerchief; but his looks belied him, his face was beaming, and one could trace a smile beneath the grimaces of his feigned grief. The day after the funeral, Louis sold off everything that could be disposed of—horses, carriages, and family plate. The next day he discharged all the old servants, who had hoped to end their days beneath the hospitable roof of Clameran. Several, with tears in their eyes, took him aside, and entreated him to let them stay, even without wages. He roughly ordered them to begone. He sent for his father's lawyer, and gave him a power of attorney to sell the estate, and received in return the sum of twenty thousand francs as the first payment in advance. At the end of the week, he locked up the château, with a vow never to enter it again, and left the keys with Jean, who, owning a little house near Clameran, would continue to live in the neighbourhood.

Poor Jean! little did he think that, in preventing Valentine from seeing Louis, he had ruined the prospects of his beloved Gaston. On receiving the keys, he asked but one question: "Shall we not search for your brother's body, sir?" he inquired in broken-hearted tones. "And, if it is found, what is to be done with it?"

"I shall leave instructions with my lawyer," answered Louis. And he hurried away from Clameran as if the ground burnt his feet. He went to Tarascon, where he had already forwarded his luggage, and took the stage-coach which travelled between Marseilles and Paris, the railroad not then being finished.

At last he was off. The lumbering vehicle rattled along, drawn by six horses; and the deep gullies made by the wheels seemed so many abysses between the past and the future. Lying back in his corner, Louis de Clameran enjoyed in anticipation the pleasures of which he was about to partake. At the end of the journey, Paris appeared before him—radiant, brilliantly dazzling as the sun. For he was going to Paris, the promised land, the city of wonders, where every Aladdin finds a lamp. There, all ambitions are crowned, all dreams are realised, all passions, all desires, good and evil, are satisfied. There the fast-fleeting days are followed by nights of ever-varied pleasure and excitement. In twenty theatres tragedy weeps, or comedy laughs; whilst at the opera, the most beautiful women in the world, sparkling with diamonds, are ready to die with ecstacy at the sound of divine music; everywhere noise, excitement, luxury, and pleasure. What a dream! The heart of Louis de Clameran was overflowing with desire; and it seemed to him that the horses crawled along like tortoises. He gave neither a thought nor a regret to the past. What mattered it to him how his father and brother had died? All his mind was devoted to penetrating the mysterious future that awaited him. Was not every chance in his favour? He was young, rich, handsome, and a marquis; he had a constitution of iron; he carried twenty thousand francs in his pocket, and would soon have ten times as many more. He, who had always been poor, regarded this sum as an inexhaustible treasure; and at nightfall, when he

jumped from the coach on to the muddy pavement of the brilliantly-lighted Paris street, he seemed to be taking possession of the great city, and felt as though he could buy everything in it. His illusions were those common to all young men who, never having been thrown upon their own resources, suddenly come into possession of a patrimony. It is this ignorance of the real value of money that squanders fortunes, and fritters away the gold so laboriously saved in the frugal provinces. Imbued with his own importance, accustomed to the deference of the country people, the young marquis came to Paris with the expectation of being a lion, on account of his name and fortune. He was mortified to discover his error. To his great surprise, he learnt that he possessed nothing which constituted a position in this immense city. He found that in the midst of the busy, indifferent crowd, he was as much lost and unnoticed as a drop of water in a torrent.

But this not very flattering reality could not discourage a man who was determined to gratify his passions at all costs. His ancestral name gained him but one privilege, disastrous for his future: it opened to him the doors of the aristocratic Faubourg St. Germain. There he became acquainted with men of his own age and rank, whose annual incomes almost equalled his entire fortune. Nearly all of them confessed that they only kept up their extravagant style of living by dint of skilful economy behind the scenes, and by regulating their vices and follies as judiciously as a hosier would arrange his Sunday holidays. This information astonished Louis, but did not open his eyes. He endeavoured to imitate the dashing style of these economically wasteful young men, without attempting to conform to their prudential rules. He learned how to spend, but not how to reckon as they did. He was Marquis de Clameran, and having given himself a reputation of great wealth, he was well received: if he made no friends, he had at least many acquaintances. At the club where he was proposed and elected shortly after his arrival, he found several obliging persons who took pleasure in initiating him into the secrets of fashionable life, and correcting any little provincialisms betrayed in his manners and conversation. He profited well and quickly by their lessons. At the end of three months he was fairly launched; his reputation as a skilful gambler was fully established; and he had nobly and gloriously compromised himself with one of the fast women of the day. He had rented handsome apartments in the vicinity of the Madeleine, with a coach-house and stabling for three horses. Although he only furnished this bachelor's establishment with what was absolutely necessary, he found that necessaries were very costly; so that the day he took possession of his apartments, and tried to make up his accounts, he made the startling discovery that his short apprenticeship in Paris had cost him fifty thousand francs, one-fourth of his fortune. And yet he remained, when compared to his brilliant friends, in a state of inferiority which was mortifying to his vanity, like a worthy countryman who strains every nerve to make his nag keep up with thoroughbreds. Fifty thousand francs! For a moment Louis had a slight inclination to retire from the contest. But then, what a come down! Besides, his vices bloomed and flourished in these charming surroundings. He had heretofore considered himself wonderfully fast, and now a host of new corruptions were revealed to him. Then the sight of suddenly acquired fortunes, and the many examples of the successful results of hazardous ventures, inflamed his mind. He thought that in this great, rich city, he certainly could succeed in securing a share of the loaves and fishes. But how? He had no idea, and he did not seek to find one. He simply persuaded him-

self that, like many others, he would have his lucky day. This is another of those errors which it is time to destroy. Fortune is not to be wasted upon idle fools. In this furious race of self-interest, it requires great skill to bestride that capricious mare called opportunity, and ride her to the goal. But Louis did not devote so much thought to the matter. As stupid as the man who expected to win the prize at the lottery without having purchased a ticket, he said to himself, "Pshaw! opportunity—chance—a rich marriage will set me right again!" The rich bride failed to appear, but the turn of the last bank-note arrived. To a pressing demand for money, his notary replied by a refusal. "You have nothing left to sell, sir," he wrote, "with the exception of the château. It is no doubt very valuable; but it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a purchaser for so large a building situated as it is now. I will use every effort to secure a purchaser; and, believe me, sir, &c." Louis was thunderstruck at this final catastrophe, as much surprised as if he had not foreseen it. What was he to do? Ruined, with nothing to hope for, he imitated those poor fools who each year rise up, shine for a moment, and then suddenly disappear. But Louis could not give up the life of ease and pleasure which he had been leading for the past three years. Fate had decreed that, after leaving his fortune on the battle-field, he should also leave his honour. He first of all lived on the reputation of his dissipated fortune—on the credit that remains to the man who has spent much in a short space of time. This resource was soon exhausted. The day came when his creditors seized all they could lay their hands upon—the last remains of his opulence, his carriages, horses, and costly furniture. He retired to a very quiet hotel, but he could not keep away from the wealthy set whom he had considered his friends. He now lived upon them as he had lived upon his tradesmen. Borrowing from one Louis up to twenty-five, from anybody who would lend to him, and never attempting to repay them. Constantly betting, no one ever saw him pay a wager. He piloted all the novices who fell into his hands, and utilised, in the most shameful services, an experience which had cost him two hundred thousand francs: he was half a courtier, and half an adventurer. His acquaintances did not cut him, but made him cruelly expiate the favour of being tolerated. No one had the least regard for his feelings, or hesitated to say before him what was thought of his conduct; therefore, whenever alone in his little den, he would give way to fits of violent rage. He could endure all these humiliations, but could not help feeling them. Envy and covetousness had long since stifled every sentiment of honour and self-respect in him. For a few years of opulence, he felt ready to commit even a crime.

He did not commit a crime, however, but he became mixed up in a disgraceful affair of swindling and extortion. The Count de Commarin, an old friend of his family, came to his assistance, hushed up the matter, and furnished him with money to take him to England. And what were his means of livelihood in London? The detectives of the most corrupt capital in the world could alone tell us. Descending to the lowest stages of vice, the Marquis de Clameran finally found his level in a society composed of fallen women and of sharpers, whose chances and shameful profits he shared. Compelled to quit London, he travelled about Europe, with no other capital than his audacity, his deep depravity, and his skill at cards. Finally, in 1865, having met with a run of good luck at Homburg, he returned to Paris, where he imagined himself entirely forgotten. Eighteen years had passed since he left France. The first step which he took on his

return, before even settling himself in Paris, was to make a visit to his old home. Not that he had any relative or even friend in that part of the country, from whom he could expect any assistance ; but he remembered the old château which his notary had been unable to sell. He thought that perhaps by this time a purchaser had appeared, and he determined to go himself and ascertain the point; he thought, too, that once in the neighbourhood, he would always be able to get something for his property, which had cost more than a hundred thousand francs to build.

Three days later, on a beautiful October evening, he reached Tarascon, and there learned that he was still the owner of the château. Early the next morning, he set out on foot to visit the paternal home at Claméran, which he had not seen for twenty-five years. Everything was so changed, that he scarcely recognised the locality where he was born, and where he passed his youth ; yet the impression was so strong, that this man, tried by such varied, strange adventures, for a moment felt like turning back. He only continued his road because a secret, hopeful voice cried to him, "Onward, onward !"—as if, at the end of the journey, was to be found a new life and the long-wished-for good fortune. As Louis advanced, however, the changes appeared less striking ; he began to recognise the ground. Soon, through the trees, he distinguished the village steeple, then the village itself, built upon the gentle slope of a hill, crowned by a wood of olive-trees. He recognised the first houses he came to : the farrier's shed, with its roof covered with vine ; the old parsonage, and farther on the village inn, where he and Gaston used to play billiards on its primitive table. In spite of what he styled his scorn of vulgar prejudices, a thrill of strange emotion oppressed his heart. He could not overcome a feeling of sadness as scenes of the past rose up before him. How many events had occurred since he last walked along this path, and received a friendly bow and smile from every villager ! Then, life appeared to him like a fairy-scene in which his every wish was gratified. And now, he returned, dishonoured, worn out, disgusted with the realities of life, having tasted the bitter dregs of the cup of shame, stigmatised, poverty-stricken, and friendless, with nothing to lose and nothing to look forward to. The few villagers whom he met turned and stood gazing after this dust-covered stranger, and wondered who he could be.

Upon reaching Jean's house, he found the door open ; he walked into the immense kitchen, with its monumental fire-place, and rapped on the table. "Coming !" answered a voice from another room.

The next moment a man of about forty years appeared in the doorway, and seemed much surprised at finding a stranger standing in his kitchen.

"What do you desire, sir ?" he inquired.

"Does not Jean, the Marquis de Claméran's old valet, live here ?"

"My father died five years ago, sir," replied the man in a sad tone.

This news affected Louis painfully, as if he had expected the old man to restore him some of his lost youth. He sighed, and said, "I am the Marquis de Claméran."

The man, at these words, uttered an exclamation of joy. He seized Louis's hand, and pressing it with respectful affection, cried : "You are the marquis ! Alas ! why is not my poor father alive to see you ?—he would be so happy ! His last words were about his dear masters, and many a time did he sigh and mourn at not receiving any news of you. He is beneath the sod now, resting after a well-spent life ; but I, Joseph, his son, am here to take his place, and devote my life to your service. What an

honour it is to have you in my house! Ah! my wife will be so happy to see you; she has all her life heard of the De Clamerans." Here he ran into the garden, and called, "Toinette! I say, 'Toinette!—Come here quickly!"

This cordial welcome delighted Louis. So many years had gone by since he had been treated with an expression of kindness, or felt the pressure of a friendly hand. In a few moments a handsome, dark-eyed young woman entered the room, and stood blushing with confusion at sight of the stranger.

"This is my wife, sir," said Joseph, leading her towards Louis; "but I have not given her time to put on her finery. This is Monsieur the Marquis, Antoinette."

The young wife bowed, and having nothing to say, gracefully uplifted her brow, upon which the marquis pressed a kiss.

"You will see the children in a few minutes, Monsieur the Marquis," said Joseph; "I have sent to the school for them."

The worthy couple overwhelmed the marquis with attentions. After so long a walk he must be hungry, they said; he must take a glass of wine now, and lunch would soon be ready; they would be so proud and happy if Monsieur the Marquis would partake of a country lunch. And Joseph went to the cellar after the wine, while 'Toinette ran to catch her fattest pullet. In a short time, Louis sat down to a table laden with the best of everything, waited upon by Joseph and his wife, who watched him with tender interest. The children came running in from school, smeared with the juice of berries. After Louis had embraced them, they stood in a corner and gazed at him with eyes wide open. The important news had spread, and a number of villagers and countrymen appeared at the open door to speak to the Marquis de Clameran.

"I am such a one, Monsieur the Marquis; don't you remember me? Ah! I recognised you at once. The late marquis was very good to me," said an old man. Another asked, "Don't you remember the time when you lent me your gun to go shooting?"

Louis welcomed with secret delight all these protestations and proofs of devotion, which had not chilled with time. The kindly voices of these honest people recalled many pleasant moments of the past, and made him feel once more the fresh sensations of his youth. No echoes of his stormy life, no suspicions of his shameful career had, then, reached this humble village on the banks of the Rhone. He, the adventurer, the bully, the base accomplice of London swindlers, delighted in these marks of respect and veneration bestowed upon him as the representative of the house of De Clameran; it seemed to make him once more feel a little self-respect. Ah! had he possessed only a quarter of his squandered inheritance, how happy he would have been to peacefully end his days in his native village! But this rest after so many vain excitements, this haven after so many storms and shipwrecks, was denied him. He was penniless. How could he live here when he had nothing to live upon? This knowledge of his pressing need gave him courage to ask Joseph for the keys of the château, that he might go and examine it.

"You won't need any key, except the one to the iron gate, Monsieur the Marquis," replied Joseph.

It was but too true. Time had done its work, and the lordly château of Clameran was nothing but a ruin. The rain and sun had rotted the doors and shutters so that they were crumbling and dilapidated. Here and there were traces of the friendly hands of Jean and his son, who had tried to re-

tard the total ruin of the old château ; but of what use were their efforts ? Within, the desolation was still greater. All of the furniture which Louis had not dared to sell stood in the position he left it, but in what a state ! All the tapestry hangings and coverings were moth-eaten and in tatters ; nothing seemed left but the dust-covered woodwork of the chairs and sofas. Louis was almost afraid to enter the grand, gloomy rooms, where every footfall echoed lugubriously. He almost expected to see the angry old marquis start up from some dark corner, and heap curses on his head for having dishonoured the name. Perhaps his terror had another cause, perhaps he recalled that stumble so fatal to Gaston. His nerves could not bear it, and he hurried out into the open air and sunshine. After a while, he recovered sufficiently to remember the object of his visit.

"Poor Jean was foolish not to make use of the furniture left in the château. It is now destroyed without having been of use to any one."

"My father would not have dared to touch anything without permission, Monsieur the Marquis."

"And he was wrong. As for the château, it is fast approaching the condition of the furniture. My fortune, I regret to say, does not permit me to repair it ; I am, therefore, resolved to sell it whilst the walls are still standing."

Joseph received this information very much as a proposal to commit a sacrilege ; but he was not bold of speech, like his father, so he dared not express what he thought.

"Would there be much difficulty in selling these ruins ?" continued Louis.

"That depends upon the price you ask, Monsieur the Marquis. I know a man of the neighbourhood who would purchase the lot if he could get it cheap."

"Who is he ?"

"A person named Fougereux, who lives on the other side of the Rhone, at Montagnette. He came from Beaucaire, and twelve years ago married a servant-maid of the late Countess de La Verberie. Perhaps Monsieur the Marquis remembers her,—a plump, bright-eyed brunette, named Mihonne."

Louis did not remember Mihonne. "When can we see this Fougereux ?" he inquired.

"At any time, by crossing the Rhone on the ferry."

"Well, let us go now. I am in a hurry."

An entire generation had passed away since Louis had left his old home. It was no longer the old republican sailor, Pilorel, who kept the ferry, but his son. But he also had a respect for tradition ; and when he learnt the name of the stranger who accompanied Joseph, he hastily got his boat ready, and was soon in the middle of the river with his two passengers. Whilst young Pilorel rowed with all his might, Joseph did his best to warn the marquis against the wily Fougereux.

"He is a cunning fox," said he. "I have had a bad opinion of him ever since his marriage, which was a shameful affair altogether. Mihonne was over fifty years of age, and he was not twenty-five when he married her ; so you will understand it was the money, and not the wife, that he wanted. She, poor fool, believed that the young scamp really loved her, and gave herself and her money up to him."

"And he has made good use of it," interrupted Pilorel.

"That is true. Fougereux is not the man to let money lie idle. He is

of the countess, and, finally, of the poor girl's marriage with a gentleman from Paris, who was so rich that he did not know the extent of his fortune, a banker named Fauvel. A piercing and prolonged cry here interrupted the old woman. "Heavens!" she exclaimed in a frightened voice, "that is my husband calling me," and, she hurried back to the farmhouse as fast as her trembling limbs could carry her.

For several minutes after her departure, Louis stood rooted to the spot. Her recital had filled his wicked mind with an idea so infamous, so detestable, that even his vile nature shrank for a moment from its enormity. He knew the rich banker by reputation, and was calculating the advantages he might gain by the strange information of which he was now possessed. It was a secret which, if skilfully managed, would bring him in a handsome income. The few faint scruples he felt were silenced by the prospect of an old age spent in poverty. "But first of all," he thought, "I must ascertain the truth of the old woman's story; then I will decide upon a plan." This was why, two days later, having received the 5,280 francs from Fougereux, Louis de Clameran set out for London.

XVI.

DURING the twenty years of her married life, Valentine had experienced but one real sorrow; and this was one which, in the course of nature, must happen sooner or later. In 1859 her mother died from inflammation of the lungs, during one of her frequent journeys to Paris. The countess preserved her faculties to the last, and with her dying breath said to her daughter: "Ah, well! was I not right in prevailing upon you to bury the past? Your silence has made my old age peaceful and happy, for which I now thank you, and it assures you a quiet future."

Madame Fauvel constantly said that, since the loss of her mother, she had never had cause to shed a tear. And what more could she wish for? As years rolled on, André's love remained the same as it had been during the first days of their union. To the love that had not diminished was added that sweet intimacy which results from long conformity of ideas and unbounded confidence. Everything prospered with this happy couple. André was far more wealthy than he had ever hoped to be, even in his wildest visions; more so even than he or Valentine desired. Their two sons, Lucien and Abel, were beautiful as their mother, noble-hearted and intelligent young men, whose honourable characters and graceful bearing were the glory of their family. Nothing was wanting to insure Valentine's felicity. When her husband and her sons were absent, her solitude was cheered by the companionship of an accomplished young girl whom she loved as her own daughter, and who in return filled the place of a devoted child. Madeleine was M. Fauvel's niece who, when an infant, had lost both parents, poor but very worthy people. Valentine adopted the babe, perhaps in memory of the poor little creature who had been abandoned to strangers. It seemed to her that God would bless her for this good action, and that Madeleine would be the guardian angel of the house. The day of the little orphan's arrival, M. Fauvel invested for her ten thousand francs, which he presented to Madeleine as her dowry. The banker amused himself by increasing these ten thousand francs in the most marvellous ways. He, who never ventured upon a rash speculation with his own money, always invested his niece's in the most hazardous schemes, and was always

so successful that, at the end of fifteen years, the ten thousand francs had become half a million. People were right when they said that the Fauvel family were to be envied. Time had dulled Valentine's remorse and anxiety. In the genial atmosphere of a happy home, she had almost found forgetfulness and a peaceful conscience. She had suffered so much at being compelled to deceive André, that she hoped she was now at quits with fate. She began to look forward to the future, and her youth seemed but buried in an impenetrable mist, the memory of a painful dream.

Yes, she believed herself saved, when, one rainy day in November, during an absence of her husband's, who had gone into the provinces on business, one of the servants brought her a letter, which had been left by a stranger, who refused to give his name. Without the faintest presentiment of evil, she carelessly broke the seal, and read: "MADAME,—Would it be relying too much upon the memories of the past to hope for half an hour of your time? To-morrow, between two and three, I will do myself the honour of calling upon you.—MARQUIS DE CLAMERAN." Fortunately, Madame Fauvel was alone. Trembling like a leaf, she read the letter over and over again, as if to convince herself that she was not the victim of a horrible hallucination. Half a dozen times, with a sort of terror, she whispered that name once so dear—Clameran! spelling it aloud as if it were a strange name which she could not pronounce. And the eight letters forming the name seemed to shine like the lightning which precedes the thunderbolt. Ah! she had hoped and believed that the fatal past was atoned for, and buried in oblivion; and now it suddenly stood before her, pitiless and threatening. Poor woman! as if all human will could prevent what was fated to be! It was in this hour of security, when she imagined herself pardoned, that the storm was to burst upon the fragile edifice of her happiness, and destroy her every hope. A long time passed before she could collect her scattered thoughts sufficiently to reflect upon a course of action. Then she began to think she was foolish to be so frightened. This letter was written by Gaston, of course; therefore she need feel no apprehension. Gaston had returned to France, and wished to see her. She could understand this desire, and she knew too well this man, upon whom she had lavished her young affection, to attribute any bad motives to his visit. He would come; and finding her the wife of another, the mother of a family, they would exchange thoughts of the past, perhaps a few regrets; she would restore the jewels which she had faithfully kept for him, and—that would be all. But one distressing doubt beset her agitated mind. Should she conceal from Gaston the birth of his son? To confess was to expose herself to many dangers. It was placing herself at the mercy of a man—a loyal, honourable man, to be sure—confiding to him not only her own honour and happiness, but the honour and happiness of her husband and her sons. Still, silence would be a crime. After abandoning her child, and depriving him of a mother's care and affection, she would rob him of his father's name and fortune.

She was still undecided, when the servant announced dinner. But she had not the courage to meet the glances of her sons. She sent word that she was not well, and would not be down to dinner. For the first time in her life she rejoiced at her husband's absence. Madeleine came hurrying into her aunt's room to see what was the matter; but Valentine dismissed her, saying she would try to sleep off her indisposition. She wished to be alone in her trouble, and her mind tried to imagine what the morrow would bring forth. This dreaded morrow soon came. She counted the hours until

two o'clock ; then she counted the minutes. At half-past two the servant announced : " Monsieur le Marquis de Clameran."

Madame Fauvel had promised herself to be calm, even cold. During a long, sleepless night, she had mentally arranged beforehand every detail of this painful meeting. She had even decided upon what she should say. She would reply thus, and ask that. But, at the dreaded moment, her strength gave way ; a frightful emotion fixed her to her seat ; she could neither speak nor think. He, however, bowed respectfully, and remained waiting in the middle of the room. He appeared about fifty years of age, with iron gray hair and moustache, and a cold, severe cast of countenance ; his expression was one of haughty severity as he stood there in his full suit of black. The agitated woman tried to discover in his face some traces of the man whom she had so madly loved, who had pressed her to his heart—the father of her son ; and she was surprised to find in the person before her no resemblance to the youth whose memory had haunted her life—no, nothing. At length, as he continued to remain motionless, she faintly murmured : " Gaston !"

But he, shaking his head, replied : " I am not Gaston, madame ; my brother succumbed to the misery and suffering of exile. I am Louis de Clameran."

What ! it was not Gaston, then, who had written to her—it was not Gaston who stood before her ! She trembled with terror ; her head whirled, and her eyes grew dim. It was not he ! And her voice alone, when she called him " Gaston," betrayed her. What, then, could this man want—this brother in whom Gaston had never cared to confide ? A thousand probabilities, each one more terrible than the other, flashed across her brain. Yet she succeeded in overcoming her weakness, so that Louis scarcely perceived it. The fearful strangeness of her situation, the very imminence of her peril, inspired her mind with extraordinary lucidness.

Pointing to a chair, she said to Louis with affected indifference : " Will you be kind enough, then, sir, to explain the object of this most unexpected visit ?"

The marquis, seeming not to notice this sudden change of manner, took a seat without removing his eyes from Madame Fauvel's face. " First of all, madame," he began, " I must ask if we can be overheard by any one ?"

" Why this question ? You can have nothing to say to me that my husband and children should not hear."

Louis shrugged his shoulders, and said : " Be good enough to answer me, madame ; not for my sake, but for your own."

" Speak, then, sir, you will not be heard."

In spite of this assurance, the marquis drew his chair close to the sofa where Madame Fauvel sat, so as to speak in a very low tone, as if almost afraid to hear his own voice. " As I told you, madame," he resumed, " Gaston is dead ; and it was I who closed his eyes, and received his last wishes. Do you understand ?"

The poor woman understood only too well, but was racking her brain to discover what could be the purpose of this fatal visit. Perhaps it was only to claim Gaston's jewels.

" It is unnecessary to recall," continued Louis, " the painful circumstances which blasted my brother's life. However happy your own lot has been, you cannot entirely have forgotten that friend of your youth who, unhesitatingly, sacrificed himself in defence of your honour."

Not a muscle of Madame Fauvel's face moved ; she appeared to be trying to recall the circumstance to which Louis alluded.

"Have you forgotten, madame?" he asked with bitterness. "Then I must try and explain myself more clearly. A long, long time ago you loved my unfortunate brother."

"Sir!"

"Ah, it is useless to deny it, madame. I told you that Gaston confided everything to me—*everything*," he added significantly.

But Madame Fauvel was not frightened by this information. This "everything" could not be of any importance, for Gaston had gone abroad in total ignorance of her secret. She rose, and said with an apparent assurance she was far from feeling: "You forget, sir, that you are speaking to a woman who is now advanced in life, who is married, and who is the mother of a family. If your brother loved me, it was his affair, and not yours. If, young and ignorant, I was led into imprudence, it is not your place to remind me of it. He would not have done so. This past which you evoke I buried in oblivion twenty years ago."

"Then you have forgotten all that happened?"

"Absolutely all."

"Even your child, madame?"

This question, accompanied by one of those looks which penetrate the innermost recesses of the soul, fell upon Madame Fauvel like a thunderbolt. She dropped tremblingly into her seat, murmuring: "He knows! How did he discover it?" Had her own happiness alone been at stake, she would have instantly thrown herself upon De Clameran's mercy. But she had her family to defend, and the consciousness of this gave her strength to resist him. "Do you wish to insult me, sir?" she asked.

"It is true, then, you have forgotten Valentin-Raoul?"

She saw that this man did indeed know all. How? It little mattered. He certainly knew; but she determined to deny everything, even in the face of the most positive proofs, if he should produce them. For an instant she had an idea of ordering the Marquis de Clameran to leave the house; but prudence stayed her. She thought it best to find out what he was driving at. "Well," she asked, with a forced laugh, "what is it you want?"

"Listen, madame. Two years ago the vicissitudes of exile took my brother to London. There, at the house of a friend, he met a young man bearing the name of Raoul. Gaston was so struck by the youth's appearance and intelligence, that he inquired who he was, and discovered that beyond a doubt this boy was his son, and your son, madame."

"This is quite a romance you are relating."

"Yes, madame, a romance, the denouement of which is in your hands. The countess, your mother, certainly used every precaution to conceal your secret; but the best-laid plans always have some weak point. After your departure, one of your mother's London friends came to the village where you had been staying. This lady pronounced your real name before the farmer's wife who was bringing up the child. Thus, everything was revealed. My brother wished for proofs, he procured the most positive, the most unobjectionable."

He stopped and closely watched Madame Fauvel's face to see the effect of his words. To his astonishment she betrayed not the slightest agitation or alarm; she was smiling.

"Well, what next?" she asked carelessly.

"Then, madame, Gaston acknowledged the child. But the De Clamerans are poor; my brother died in a lodging-house; and I have only an annuity of twelve hundred francs to live upon. What is to become of

Raoul, alone without relations or friends to assist him? This anxiety embittered my brother's last moments."

"Really, sir—"

"I will conclude," interrupted Louis. "It was then that Gaston opened his heart to me. He told me to seek you. 'Valentine,' said he, 'Valentine will remember; she will not allow our son to want for everything, even bread; she is wealthy, very wealthy; I die in peace.'"

Madame Fauvel rose from her seat, evidently with the intention of dismissing her visitor. "You must confess, sir," she said, "that I have shown great patience."

This imperturbable assurance amazed Louis so much that he did not reply.

"I do not deny," she continued, "that I at one time possessed the confidence of M. Gaston de Clameran. I will prove it by restoring to you your mother's jewels, with which he entrusted me at the time of his departure." While speaking she took from beneath the sofa-cushion the bag of jewels, and handed it to Louis. "Hear they are, sir," she added; "permit me to express my surprise that your brother never asked me for them."

Had he been less master of himself, Louis would have shown how great was his surprise. "I was told," he said sharply, "not to mention this matter."

Madame Fauvel, without making any reply, laid her hand on the bell-rope. "You will allow me, sir," she said, "to end this interview, which was only granted for the purpose of placing in your hands these precious jewels."

Thus dismissed, M. de Clameran was obliged to take his leave without attaining his object. "As you will, madame," he said; "I leave you; but before doing so I must tell you the rest of my brother's dying injunctions: 'If Valentine disregards the past, and refuses to provide for our son, I enjoin it upon you to compel her to do her duty.' Meditate upon these words, madame, for what I have sworn to do, upon my honour, shall be done!"

At last Madame Fauvel was alone. She could give vent to her despair. Exhausted by her efforts at self-restraint during De Clameran's presence, she felt weary and crushed in body and spirit. She had scarcely strength to drag herself up to her bed-chamber, and to lock the door. Now there was no room for doubt; her fears had become realities. She could fathom the abyss into which she was about to be hurled, and knew that in her fall she would drag her family with her. God alone, in this hour of danger, could help her, could save her from destruction. She prayed. "O God!" she cried, "punish me, for I am very guilty, and I will evermore adore Thy chastising hand. Punish me, for I have been a bad daughter, an unworthy mother, and a perfidious wife. Smite me, O God, and only me! In Thy just anger spare the innocent, have pity upon my husband and my children!" What were her twenty years of happiness compared to this hour of misery? A bitter remorse; nothing more. Ah, why did she listen to her mother? Why did she hold her tongue? Hope had fled for ever. This man who had left her presence with a threat upon his lips would return; she knew it well. What answer could she give him? To-day she had succeeded in subduing her heart and conscience; would she again have the strength to master her feelings? She well knew that her calmness and courage were entirely due to De Clameran's unskilfulness. Why did he not use entreaties instead of threats! When Louis spoke of Raoul, she could scarcely conceal her emotion; her maternal heart yearned towards

the innocent child who was expiating his mother's faults. A chill of horror passed over her at the idea of his enduring the pangs of hunger. Her child wanting bread, when she, his mother, was rolling in wealth! Ah, why could she not lay all her possessions at his feet? With what delight would she undergo the greatest privations for his sake! If she could but send him enough money to support him comfortably! But no; she could not take this step without compromising herself and her family. Prudence forbade her acceptance of Louis de Clameran's intervention. To confide in him, was placing herself, and all she held dear, at his mercy, and this inspired her with instinctive terror. Then she began to ask herself if he had really spoken the truth. In thinking over Louis's story, it seemed improbable and disconnected. If Gaston had been living in Paris, in the poverty described by his brother, why had he not demanded of the married woman the deposit entrusted to the maiden? Why, when anxious about their child's future, had he not come to her, since he believed her to be so rich that, on his deathbed, it was she he relied upon. A thousand vague apprehensions beset her mind; she felt suspicion and distrust of everyone and everything. She was aware that a decisive step would bind her for ever, and then, what would not be exacted of her? For a moment she thought of throwing herself at her husband's feet and confessing all. Unfortunately, she thrust aside this means of salvation. She pictured to herself the mortification and sorrow that her noble-hearted husband would suffer upon discovering, after a lapse of twenty years, how shamefully he had been deceived. Having been deceived from the very first, would he not believe that it had been so ever since? Would he believe in her fidelity as a wife, when he discovered her perfidy as a young girl? She understood André well enough to know that he would say nothing, and would use every means to conceal the scandal. But his domestic happiness would be gone for ever. He would forsake his home; his sons would shun her presence, and every family bond would be severed. She thought of ending her doubts by suicide; but her death would not silence her implacable enemy, who, not being able to disgrace her while alive, would dishonour her memory.

Fortunately, the banker was still absent; and, during the two days succeeding Louis's visit, Madame Fauvel was able to keep her room under pretence of illness. But Madeleine, with her feminine instinct, saw that her aunt was troubled by something worse than the nervous attack for which the physician was prescribing all sorts of remedies. She noticed, too, that this sudden illness seemed to have been caused by the visit of a stern-looking stranger, who had been closeted for a long time with her aunt. Madeleine felt so sure that something was wrong, that, on the second day, seeing Madame Fauvel more anxious still, she ventured to say: "What makes you so sad, dear aunt? Tell me, shall I ask our good priest to come and see you?" With a sharpness foreign to her nature, which was gentleness itself, Madame Fauvel refused to listen to her niece's suggestion. What Louis calculated upon happened. After long reflection, not seeing any issue to her deplorable situation, Madame Fauvel little by little determined to yield. By consenting to all, she had a chance of saving everything. She well knew that to act thus was to prepare a life of torture for herself; but she alone would be the victim, and, at any rate, she would be gaining time. In the meantime, M. Fauvel had returned home, and Valentine resumed her accustomed ways. But she was no longer the happy mother and devoted wife, whose smiling presence was wont to fill

the house with sunshine and comfort. She was beset by the most frightful anxieties. Hearing nothing of De Clameran, she expected to see him appear, so to say, at any moment; trembling at every ring of the bell, turning pale whenever the door opened, and not daring to leave the house, for fear he should come during her absence. The condemned man, who, each morning on awaking asks himself: "Is it for to-day?" does not suffer more dreadful agony. De Clameran did not come; he wrote, or rather, as he was too prudent to furnish arms which could be used against himself, he had a note written, which Madame Fauvel alone might understand, in which he said that, being ill, he begged she would excuse his being obliged to make an appointment with her for the next day at the Hotel du Louvre. The letter was almost a relief to Madame Fauvel. Anything was preferable to suspense. She was ready to consent to everything. She burned the letter, and said to herself: "I will go."

The next day towards the appointed time, she dressed herself in the plainest of her black dresses, in the bonnet which concealed her face the most, placed a thick veil in her pocket, and started forth. It was not until she found herself a considerable distance from her home that she ventured to hail a cab, which soon set her down at the Hotel du Louvre. Here her uneasiness increased. Her circle of acquaintances being large, she was in terror of being recognised. What would her friends think, if they saw her at the Hotel du Louvre dressed as she was? Any one would naturally suspect an intrigue, a rendezvous; and her character would be ruined for ever. This was the first time since her marriage that she had had occasion for mystery; and, in her inexperience, her efforts to escape notice were in every way calculated to attract attention. The concierge said that the Marquis de Clameran's room was on the third floor. She hurried up the stairs, glad to escape the scrutinising glances which she imagined were fixed upon her; but, in spite of the minute directions given by the concierge, she lost her way in the immense hotel, and for a long time wandered about the interminable corridors. Finally, she found a door bearing the number sought,—317. She stood leaning against the wall with her hand pressed to her throbbing heart, which seemed ready to burst. Now, at the moment of risking this decisive step, she felt paralysed with fright. The sight of a stranger traversing the corridor ended her hesitations. With a trembling hand she knocked at the door.

"Come in," said a voice.

She entered. But it was not the Marquis de Clameran who stood in the middle of the room, it was quite a young man, almost a youth, who looked at her with a singular expression. Madame Fauvel thought that she had mistaken the room. "Excuse me, sir," she said, blushing deeply: "I thought that this was the Marquis de Clameran's room."

"It is his room, madame," replied the young man; then seeing she was silent, and about to leave, he added: "I presume I have the honour of addressing Madame Fauvel?"

She nodded affirmatively, shuddering at the sound of her own name, and frightened at this proof of De Clameran's betrayal of her secret to a stranger. With visible anxiety she awaited an explanation.

"Fear nothing, madame," resumed the young man: "you are as safe here as if you were in your own drawing-room. M. de Clameran desired me to make his excuses; you will not see him."

"But, sir, from an urgent letter sent by him yesterday, I was led to suppose—I inferred—"

"When he wrote to you, madame, he had projects in view which he has since renounced for ever."

Madame Fauvel was too surprised, too agitated to think clearly. Beyond the present she could see nothing. "Do you mean," she asked with distrust, "that he has changed his intentions?"

The young man's face was expressive of sad compassion, as if he shared the unhappy woman's sufferings. "The marquis has renounced," he said in a melancholy tone, "what he wrongly considered a sacred duty. Believe me, he hesitated a long time before he could decide to apply to you on a subject painful to you both. You repelled him, you were obliged to refuse to hear him. He knew not what imperious reasons dictated your conduct. Blinded by unjust anger, he swore to obtain by threats what you refused to give voluntarily. Resolved to attack your domestic happiness, he had collected overwhelming proofs against you. Pardon him: an oath given to his dying brother bound him." He took from the mantelpiece a bundle of papers through which he glanced as he continued speaking: "These proofs that cannot be denied, I now hold in my hand. This is the certificate of the Rev. Mr. Sedley; this the declaration of Mrs. Dobbin, the farmer's wife; and these others are the statements of the physician and of several persons who were acquainted with Madame de La Verberie during her stay near London. Not a single link is missing. I had great difficulty in getting these papers away from M. de Clameran. Perhaps he had a suspicion of my intentions. This, madame, is what I intended doing with these proofs."

With a rapid motion he threw the bundle of papers into the fire where they blazed up, and, in a moment, nothing remained of them but a little heap of ashes. "All is now destroyed, madame," he resumed, his eyes sparkling with the most generous resolutions. "The past, if you desire it, is as completely annihilated as those papers. If any one, hereafter, dares accuse you of having had a son before your marriage, treat him as a vile calumniator. There are no longer any proofs; you are free."

Madame Fauvel began to understand the sense of this scene—the truth dawned upon her bewildered mind. This noble youth, who protected her from De Clameran's anger, who restored her peace of mind and the exercise of her own free will, by destroying all proofs of her past, who in fact saved her, was, must be, the child whom she had abandoned—Valentin-Raoul. At this moment she forgot everything. Maternal tenderness, so long restrained, now welled up and overflowed as, in a scarcely audible voice, she murmured: "Raoul!"

At this name, uttered in so thrilling a tone, the young man staggered, as if overcome by an un hoped-for happiness. "Yes, Raoul," he cried; "Raoul, who would rather die a thousand times than cause his mother the slightest pain; Raoul, who would shed his life's blood to spare her one tear."

She made no attempt to struggle nor resist; all her body trembled as she recognised her first-born. She opened her arms, and Raoul sprang into them, saying, in a choked voice: "Mother! my dear mother! Bless you for this first kiss!"

Alas! this was the sad truth. This dear son she had never seen before. He had been taken from her, despite her prayers and tears, without a mother's embrace; and this kiss she had just given him was indeed the first. But joy so great, following upon so much anguish, was more than the excited mother could bear; she sank back in her chair almost fainting,

and, with a sort of meditative rapture, gazed in an eager way upon her long-lost son, who was now kneeling at her feet. With her hand she stroked his soft curls; she admired his white forehead, pure as a young girl's, and his large, trembling eyes; and she hungered after his red lips.

"O mother!" he said; "words cannot describe my feelings when I heard that my uncle had dared to threaten you. He threaten you! Ah! when my father told him to apply to you, he was no longer in his right mind. I have known you for a long, long time. Often have my father and I hovered around your happy home to catch a glimpse of you through the window. When you passed by in your carriage, he would say to me: 'There is your mother, Raoul!' To look upon you was our greatest joy. When we knew you were going to a ball, we would wait near the door to see you enter, beautiful and adorned. How often, in the depth of winter, have I raced with your fast horses, to admire you till the last moment!"

Tears—the sweetest tears she had ever shed—coursed down Madame Fauvel's cheeks, as she listened to the musical tones of Raoul's voice. This voice was so like Gaston's, that it recalled to her the fresh and adorable sensations of her youth. She seemed to live over again those early stolen meetings—to feel once more the beatings of her virgin heart. It seemed as though nothing had happened since Gaston folded her in his fond embrace. André, her two sons, Madeleine—all were forgotten in this new-found affection.

Raoul went on to say: "Only yesterday I learnt that my uncle had been to demand for me a few crumbs of your wealth. Why did he take such a step? I am poor, it is true—very poor; but I am too familiar with poverty to be frightened of it. I have a clear brain and willing hands—they will earn me a living. You are very rich, I have been told. What is that to me? Keep all your fortune, my darling mother; but give me a corner in your heart. Let me love you, Promise me that this first kiss shall not be the last. No one will ever know; be not afraid. I shall be able to hide my happiness."

And Madame Fauvel had dreaded this son! Ah! how bitterly did she now reproach herself for not having sooner flown to meet him. She questioned him regarding the past; she wished to know how he had lived—what he had been doing. He replied that he had nothing to conceal; his existence had been that of every poor man's child. The farmer's wife who had brought him up had always treated him with affection. She had even given him an education superior to his condition in life, and rather beyond her means, because she thought him so handsome and intelligent. When about sixteen years of age, she procured him a situation in a banking-house; and he was commencing to earn his own living, when one day a stranger came to him, and said: "I am your father," and took him away with him. Since then nothing was wanting to his happiness, save a mother's tenderness. He had suffered but one great sorrow, and that was the day when Gaston de Clameran—his father—had died in his arms. "But now," he said, "all is forgotten. Have I been unhappy? I no longer know, since I see you—since I love you."

Madame Fauvel was oblivious of the lapse of time, but fortunately Raoul was on the watch. "Why, it is seven o'clock!" he suddenly exclaimed. This exclamation brought Madame Fauvel abruptly back to the reality. Seven o'clock! What would her family think of this long absence?

"Shall I see you again, mother?" asked Raoul, as they were about to separate.

"Oh yes!" she replied, fondly; "yes, often, every day, to-morrow."

But now, for the first time since her marriage, Madame Fauvel perceived that she was not mistress of her actions. Never before had she had occasion to wish for uncontrolled liberty. She left her heart and soul behind her in the room of the Hotel du Louvre, where she had just found her son. She was compelled to leave him, to undergo the intolerable agony of composing her face to conceal this great happiness, which had changed her whole life and being. Having some difficulty in procuring a cab, it was more than half-past seven when she reached the Rue de Provence, where she found the family waiting dinner for her. She thought her husband silly, and even vulgar, when he joked her upon being late. So strange are the sudden effects of a new passion, that she regarded almost with contempt this unbounded confidence he reposed in her. And she, ordinarily so timorous, replied to his jest with imperturbable calmness, almost without an effort. So intoxicating had been her sensations while with Raoul, that in her joy she was incapable of desiring anything else—of dreaming of aught save the renewal of those delightful emotions. No longer was she a devoted wife—an incomparable mother. She scarcely thought of her two sons. They had always been happy and beloved. They had a father—they were rich; whilst the other, the other! oh, how much reparation was owing to him! In her blindness, she almost regarded her family as responsible for Raoul's sufferings. Her folly was complete. No remorse for the past, no apprehensions for the future, disturbed her conscience. To her the future was to-morrow; eternity—the sixteen hours which separated her from another interview. To her, Gaston's death seemed to absolve the past as well as the present. But she regretted she was married. Free, she could have consecrated herself exclusively to Raoul. She was rich, but how gladly would she have sacrificed her affluence to enjoy poverty with him! Neither her husband nor sons would ever suspect the thoughts which absorbed her mind; but she dreaded her niece. She imagined that Madeleine looked at her strangely on her return home. Did she suspect something? For several days she had asked embarrassing questions. She must beware of her.

This uneasiness changed the affection which Madame Fauvel had hitherto felt for her adopted daughter into positive dislike. She, so kind and loving, regretted having placed over herself a vigilant spy from whom nothing escaped. She pondered what means she could take to avoid the penetrating watchfulness of a girl who was accustomed to read in her face every thought that crossed her mind. With unspeakable satisfaction she thought of a way which she imagined would please all parties. During the last two years the banker's cashier and protégé, Prosper Bertomy, had been devoted in his attentions to Madeleine. Madame Fauvel decided to do all in her power to hasten matters, so that, Madeleine once married and out of the house, there would be no one to criticise her own movements. That very evening, with a duplicity of which she would have been incapable a few days before, she began to question Madeleine about her sentiments towards Prosper.

"Ah, ah, mademoiselle," she said gaily, "is it thus you permit yourself to choose a husband without my permission?"

"But aunt! I thought you—"

"Yes, I know; you thought I had suspected the true state of affairs? That is precisely what I had done." Then, in a serious tone she added: "Therefore, nothing remains but to obtain the consent of Master Prosper. Do you think he will grant it?"

"He ! aunt. Ah ! if he only dared—"

"Ah, indeed ! you seem to know all about it, mademoiselle."

Madeleine, blushing and confused, hung her head, and said nothing. Madame Fauvel drew her towards her, and continued in her most affectionate voice : "My dear child, do not be distressed. Is it possible that you, usually so sharp, supposed us to be in ignorance of your secret ? Did you think that Prosper would have been so warmly welcomed by your uncle and myself, had we not approved of him in every respect ?"

Madeleine threw her arms round her aunt's neck, and murmured : "Oh, thank you, my dear aunt, thank you ; you are kind, you love me !"

Madame Fauvel said to herself : "I will make André speak to Prosper, and before two months are over the marriage can take place."

Unfortunately, Madame Fauvel was so engrossed by her new passion, which did not leave her a moment for reflection, that she put off this project. Spending a portion of each day at the Hotel du Louvre with Raoul, she did not cease devoting her thoughts to insuring him an independent fortune and a good position. She had not yet ventured to speak to him on the subject. She imagined that she had discovered in him all his father's noble pride and sensitiveness. She anxiously wondered if he would ever accept the least assistance from her. The Marquis de Clameran quieted her doubts on this point. She had frequently met him since the day on which he had so frightened her, and to her first aversion had succeeded a secret sympathy. She felt kindly towards him for the affection he lavished on her son. If Raoul, with the heedlessness of youth, mocked at the future, Louis, the man of the world, seemed very anxious about his nephew's welfare. So that, one day, after a few general observations, he approached this serious question.

"The pleasant life my nephew leads is all very well," he commenced, "but would it not be prudent for him to seek some employment ? He has no fortune."

"Ah, my dear uncle, do let me enjoy my present happiness. What is the use of any change ? What do I want ?"

"You want for nothing at present, Raoul ; but when your resources are exhausted, and mine too—which will be in a short time—what will become of you ?"

"Oh ! I will enter the army. All the De Clamerans are born soldiers ; and if a war breaks out—"

Madame Fauvel laid her hand upon his lips, and said in a reproachful tone : "Cruel boy ! become a soldier ? Would you, then, deprive me of the joy of seeing you ?"

"No, mother dear ; no."

"You see," insisted Louis, "that you must listen to us."

"I am quite willing ; but some other time. I will work and earn no end of money."

"How, poor foolish boy ? What can you do ?"

"Oh ! never mind. I don't know now ; but set your mind at rest, I will find a way."

Finding it impossible to make this self-sufficient youth listen to reason, Louis and Madame Fauvel, after discussing the matter fully, decided that assistance must be forced upon him. It was difficult, however, to choose a profession ; and De Clameran thought it prudent to wait awhile, and study the bent of the young man's mind. In the meanwhile, it was decided that Madame Fauvel should place funds at the marquis's disposal for Raoul's

support. Regarding Gaston's brother in the light of a father to her child, Madame Fauvel soon found him indispensable. She continually wanted to see him, either to consult him concerning some new idea which occurred to her, or to impress upon him some good advice to be given. Thus she was well pleased when one day he requested the honour of being allowed to call upon her at her own house. Nothing was easier than to introduce the Marquis de Clameran to her husband as an old friend of her family; and, after once being admitted, he could soon become an intimate acquaintance. Madame Fauvel soon had reason to congratulate herself upon this arrangement. Unable to continue to go to Raoul every day, and not daring, if she wrote to him, to receive his replies, she obtained news of him through Louis.

For about a month, things went on smoothly, when one day the marquis confessed that Raoul was giving him a great deal of trouble. His hesitating, embarrassed manner frightened Madame Fauvel. She thought something had happened, and that he was trying to break the bad news gently.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"I am sorry to say," replied De Clameran, "that this young man has inherited all the pride and passions of his ancestors. He is one of those natures who stop at nothing, who find incitement in opposition; and I can think of no way of checking him in his mad career."

"Merciful heaven! what has he been doing?"

"Nothing particularly censurable; nothing irreparable, certainly; but I am afraid of the future. He is still unaware of the liberal allowance which you have placed in my hands for his benefit; he thinks that I support him, and yet he throws away money as if he were the son of a millionaire."

Like all mothers, Madame Fauvel attempted to excuse her son. "Perhaps you are a little severe," she said. "Poor child, he has suffered so much! He has undergone so many privations during his childhood, that this sudden happiness and wealth has turned his head; he seizes on pleasure as a starving man seizes on a piece of bread. Is it so surprising? Ah, only have patience, and he will soon return to the path of duty, he has a good heart."

"He has suffered so much!" was Madame Fauvel's constant excuse for Raoul. This was her invariable reply to M. de Clameran's complaints of his nephew's conduct. And, having once commenced, he was now constant in his accusations against Raoul.

"Nothing restrains his extravagance and dissipation," Louis would say in a mournful voice; "the instant a piece of folly enters his head, it is carried out, no matter at what cost."

But Madame Fauvel saw no reason why her son should be thus harshly judged. "We must remember," she replied in an aggrieved tone, "that from infancy he has been left to his own unguided impulses. The unfortunate boy never had a mother to tend and counsel him. You must remember, too, that in his childhood he never knew a father's guidance."

"There is some excuse for him, to be sure; but nevertheless he must change his present course. Could you not speak seriously to him, madame? You have more influence over him than I."

She promised, but did not keep her promise. She had so little time to devote to Raoul, that it seemed cruel to spend it in reprimands. Sometimes she would hurry from home for the purpose of following the marquis's advice; but, the instant she saw Raoul, her courage failed; a pleading look from his soft, dark eyes silenced the rebuke upon her lips; the sound

of his voice banished every anxious thought from her mind. But De Clameran was not a man to lose sight of the main object; he would have no compromise with duty. His brother had bequeathed to him, as a precious trust, his son Raoul; he regarded himself, he said, as his guardian, and would be held responsible in another world for his welfare. He entreated Madame Fauvel to use her influence, when he found himself powerless in trying to check the heedless youth in his downward career. She ought, for the sake of her child, to see more of him, in fact, every day.

"Alas," the poor woman replied, "that would be my heart's desire. But how can I do it? Have I the right to ruin myself? I have other children, for whom I must be careful of my reputation."

This answer appeared to astonish De Clameran. A fortnight before, Madame Fauvel would not have alluded to her other sons. "I will think the matter over," said Louis, "and perhaps when I see you next I shall be able to submit to you a plan which will reconcile everything."

The reflections of a man of so much experience could not be fruitless. He had a relieved, satisfied look, when he called to see Madame Fauvel in the following week. "I think I have solved the problem," he said.

"What problem?"

"The means of saving Raoul."

He explained himself by saying that as Madame Fauvel could not, without arousing her husband's suspicions, visit Raoul daily, she must receive him at her own house. This proposition shocked Madame Fauvel; for though she had been imprudent, even culpable, she was the soul of honour, and naturally shrank from the idea of introducing Raoul into the midst of her family, and seeing him welcomed by her husband, and perhaps become the friend of his sons. Her instinctive sense of justice made her declare that she would never consent to such an infamous step.

"Yes," said the marquis thoughtfully; "but then it is the only chance of saving your child."

But this time, at least, she resisted, and with an indignation and an energy capable of shaking a will less strong than the Marquis de Clameran's. "No," she repeated, "no; I can never consent."

Unhappy woman! little did she know of the pitfalls which stand ever ready to swallow up wanderers from the straight path. Before a week had passed she listened to this project, which at first had filled her with horror, with a willing ear, and even began to devise means for its speedy execution. Yes, after a cruel struggle, she finally yielded to the pressure of De Clameran's politely uttered threats and Raoul's wheedling entreaties.

"But how?" she asked, "upon what pretext can I receive Raoul?"

"It would be the easiest thing in the world," replied De Clameran, "to introduce him as an ordinary acquaintance, as I, myself, have the honour of being. But Raoul must be more than that."

After torturing Madame Fauvel for a long time, and almost driving her out of her mind, he finally revealed his scheme. "We have in our hands," he said, "the solution of the problem. It is an inspiration."

Madame Fauvel eagerly scanned his face as she listened with the pitiable resignation of a martyr.

"Have you not a cousin, a widow lady, who had two daughters, living at St. Remy?" continued Louis.

"Yes, Madame de Lagors."

"Precisely so. What fortune has she?"

"She is poor, sir, very poor."

"And, but for the assistance you render her secretly, she would be thrown upon the charity of the world."

Madame Fauvel was bewildered at finding the marquis so well informed of her private affairs. "How could you have discovered this?" she asked.

"Oh, I know all about this affair, and many others besides. I know, for instance, that your husband knows none of your relatives, and that he is scarcely aware of the existence of your cousin De Lagors. Do you begin to comprehend my plan?"

She understood it slightly, and was asking herself how she could resist it.

"This," continued Louis, "is what I have planned. To-morrow or next day, you will receive a letter from your cousin at St. Remy, telling you that she has sent her son to Paris, and begging you to watch over him. Naturally you show this letter to your husband; and a few days afterwards he warmly welcomes your nephew, Raoul de Lagors, a handsome, rich, attractive young man, who will do everything he can to please him, and who will succeed."

"Never, sir," replied Madame Fauvel, "my cousin is a pious, honourable woman, and nothing would induce her to countenance so shameful a transaction."

The marquis smiled scornfully, and asked: "Who told you that I intended to confide in her?"

"But you would be obliged to do so!"

"You are very simple, madame. The letter which you will receive, and show to your husband, will be dictated by me, and posted at St. Remy by a friend of mine. If I spoke of the obligations under which you have placed your cousin, it was merely to show you that, in case of accident, her own interest would make her serve you. Do you see any other obstacle to this plan, madame?"

Madame Fauvel's eyes flashed with indignation. "Is my will of no account?" she exclaimed, "You seem to have made your arrangements without consulting me at all."

"Excuse me," said the marquis with ironical politeness; "I am sure that you will take the same view of the matter as myself."

"But it is a crime, sir, that you propose—an abominable crime!"

This speech seemed to arouse all the bad passions slumbering in De Clameran's bosom; and his pale face had a fiendish expression as he fiercely replied: "I think we do not quite understand each other. Before you begin to talk about crime, think over your past life. You were not so timid and scrupulous when you gave yourself up to your lover. It is true that you did not hesitate to refuse to share his exile, when for your sake he had just jeopardised his life by killing two men. You felt no scruples at abandoning your child in London; although rolling in wealth, you never even inquired if this poor waif had bread to eat. You felt no scruples about marrying M. Fauvel. Did you tell your confiding husband of the lines of shame concealed beneath your wreath of orange blossom? No! All these crimes you indulged in; and, when in Gaston's name I demand reparation, you indignantly refuse! It is too late! You ruined the father; but you shall save the son, or I swear you shall no longer cheat the world of its esteem."

"I will obey you, sir," murmured the trembling, frightened woman.

The following week Raoul, now Raoul de Lagors, was seated at the banker's dinner-table, between Madame Fauvel and Madeleine.

XVII.

It was not without the most painful suffering and self-condemnation that Madame Fauvel submitted to the will of the pitiless Marquis de Clameran. She had used every argument and entreaty to soften him; but he merely looked upon her with a triumphant, sneering smile, when she knelt at his feet, and implored him to be merciful. Neither tears nor prayers moved his depraved soul. Disappointed, and almost desperate, she sought the intercession of her son. Raoul was in a state of furious indignation at the sight of his mother's distress, and hastened to demand an apology from De Clameran. But he had reckoned without his host. He soon returned with downcast eyes, and moodily angry at his own powerlessness, declaring that safety demanded a complete surrender to the tyrant. Now only did the wretched woman fully fathom the abyss into which she was being dragged, and clearly see the labyrinth of crime of which she was becoming the victim. And all this suffering was the consequence of a fault, an interview granted to Gaston. Ever since that fatal day she had been vainly struggling against the implacable logic of events. Her life had been spent in trying to overcome the past, and now it had risen to crush her. The hardest thing of all to do, the act that most wrung her heart, was showing to her husband the forged letter from St. Remy, and saying that she expected soon to see her nephew, a quite young man, and very rich! But words cannot paint the torture she endured on the evening that she introduced Raoul to her family. It was with a smile on his lips that the banker welcomed this nephew, of whom he had never heard before. "It is natural," said he, as he held out his hand, "when one is young and rich, to prefer Paris to St. Remy." Raoul did his utmost to deserve this cordial reception. If his early education had been neglected, and he lacked those delicate refinements of manner and conversation which home influence imparts, his superior tact concealed these defects. He possessed the happy faculty of reading characters, and adapting his conversation to the minds of his listeners. Before a week had gone by, he was a favourite with M. Fauvel, intimate with Abel and Lucien, and inseparable from Prosper Bertomy, the cashier, who then spent all his evenings with the banker's family. Charmed at the favourable impression made by Raoul, Madame Fauvel recovered comparative ease of mind, and at times almost congratulated herself upon having obeyed the marquis, and began once more to hope. Alas! she rejoiced too soon.

Raoul's intimacy with his cousins threw him among a set of rich young men, and as a consequence, instead of reforming, he daily grew more dissipated and reckless. Gambling, racing, expensive suppers, made money slip through his fingers like grains of sand. This proud young man, whose sensitive delicacy not long since made him refuse to accept aught save affection from his mother, now never approached her without demanding large sums of money. At first she gave with pleasure, without stopping to count the cash. But she soon perceived that her generosity, if she did not keep it within bounds, would be her ruin. This rich woman, whose magnificent diamonds, elegant toilets, and superb equipages were the admiration and envy of Paris, knew misery in its bitterest form: that of not being able to gratify the desires of a beloved being. Her husband had never thought of giving her a fixed sum for expenses. The day after their

wedding he gave her a key to his secretary, and ever since, she had been in the habit of freely taking the money necessary for keeping up the establishment, and for her own personal requirements. But the fact of her having always been so modest in her personal expenses, that her husband used to jest her on the subject, and of her having managed the household expenditure in a most judicious manner she was not able to suddenly dispose of large sums, without giving rise to embarrassing questions. M. Fauvel, the most generous of millionaires, would have delighted to see his wife indulge in any extravagance, no matter how foolish; but he would naturally expect to see traces of the money spent, something to show for it. The banker might suddenly discover that much more than the usual amount of money was used in the house; and, if he should ask the cause of this astonishing outlay, what answer could she give?

In three months, Raoul had squandered a little fortune. In the first place, he was obliged to have bachelor's apartments, prettily furnished. He was in want of everything, just like a shipwrecked sailor. He asked for a horse and brougham, how could she refuse him? Then every day there was some fresh whim to be satisfied.

When she would gently remonstrate, Raoul's beautiful eyes would fill with tears, and in a sad, humble tone he would say: "Alas! I am a child, a poor fool, I ask too much. I forget that I am only the son of poor Valentine, and not of the rich banker's wife!"

This touching repentance wrung her heart. The poor boy had suffered so much that it was her duty to console him, and she would finish by excusing him. She soon discovered that he was jealous and envious of his two brothers—for, after all, they were his brothers—Abel and Lucien.

"You never refuse them anything," he would say; "they were fortunate enough to enter life by the golden gate. Their every wish is gratified; they enjoy wealth, position, home affection, and have a splendid future awaiting them."

"But what is lacking to your happiness, unhappy child?" Madame Fauvel would ask in despair.

"What do I want? apparently nothing, in reality everything. Do I possess anything legitimately? What right have I to your affection, to the comforts and luxuries you heap upon me, to the name I bear? Have I not, so to say, stolen even my life?"

When Raoul talked in this strain, she was ready to do anything, so that he should not be envious of her two other sons. As spring approached, she told him she wished him to spend the summer in the country, near her villa at St. Germain. She expected he would offer some objection. But not at all. The proposal seemed to please him, and a few days after he told her he had rented a little house at Vésinet, and intended having his furniture moved into it.

"Then, just think, dear mother, what a happy summer we will spend together!" he said with beaming eyes.

She was delighted for many reasons, one of which was that the prodigal's expenses would probably diminish. Anxiety as to the exhausted state of her finances made her bold enough to chide him at the dinner-table one day for having lost two thousand francs at the races the day before.

"You are severe, my dear," said M. Fauvel with the carelessness of a rich man. "Mamma De Lagors will pay; mamma's were created for the special purpose of paying." And, not observing the effect these words had

upon his wife, he turned to Raoul, and added: "Don't worry yourself, my boy; when you want money, come to me, and I will lend you some."

What could Madame Fauvel say? Had she not followed De Clameran's orders, and announced that Raoul was very rich? Why had she been made to tell this unnecessary lie? She all at once perceived the snare which had been laid for her: but now she was caught, and it was too late to struggle. The banker's offer was soon accepted. That same week Raoul went to his uncle, and boldly borrowed ten thousand francs. When Madame Fauvel heard of this piece of audacity, she wrung her hands in despair.

"What can he want with so much money?" she moaned to herself.

For some time De Clameran had kept away from Madame Fauvel's house. She decided to write and ask him to call. She hoped that this energetic, determined man, who was so fully awake to his duties as a guardian would make Raoul listen to reason. When De Clameran heard what had taken place, his surprise and anger were unbounded. A violent altercation ensued between him and Raoul. But Madame Fauvel's suspicions were aroused: she watched them, and it seemed to her—could it be possible?—that their anger was feigned; that, although they abused and even threatened each other in the bitterest language, their eyes were smiling. She dared not breathe her doubts; but, like a subtle poison which disorganises everything with which it comes in contact, this new suspicion filled her thoughts, and added to her already intolerable sufferings. Yet she never once thought of blaming Raoul, for she still loved him madly. She accused the marquis of taking advantage of the youthful weaknesses and inexperience of his nephew. She knew that she would have to suffer insolence and extortion from this man who had her completely in his power; but she could not penetrate his motive for acting as he did. He soon acquainted her with it.

One day, after complaining more bitterly than usual of Raoul, and proving to Madame Fauvel that it was impossible for this state of affairs to continue much longer, the marquis declared that he saw but one way of preventing a catastrophe. This was, that he (De Clameran) should marry Madaleine. Madame Fauvel had long ago been prepared for anything his cupidity could attempt. But if she had given up all hope of happiness for herself, if she consented to the sacrifice of her own peace of mind, it was because she thus hoped to insure the security of those dear to her. This unexpected declaration shocked her. "Do you suppose for an instant, sir," she indignantly exclaimed, "that I will consent to any such disgraceful project?"

With a nod, the marquis answered: "Yes."

"What sort of a woman do you think I am, sir? Alas! I was very guilty once, but the punishment now exceeds the fault. And does it become you to be constantly reproaching me with my long-past imprudence? So long as I alone had to suffer, you found me weak and timid; but, now that you attack those I love, I rebel."

"Would it then, madame, be such a very great misfortune for Mademoiselle Madeleine to become the Marchioness de Clameran?"

"My niece, sir, chose, of her own free will, a husband whom she will shortly marry. She loves M. Prosper Bertomy."

The marquis disdainfully shrugged his shoulders. "A school-girl love affair," said he; "she will forget all about it, when you wish her to do so."

"I will never wish it."

"Excuse me," he replied, in the low, suppressed tone of a man trying to

control himself ; " let us not waste time in these idle discussions. Hitherto you have always commenced by protesting against my proposed plans, and in the end acknowledged the good sense and justness of my arguments. This time, also, you will oblige me by yielding."

"Never," said Madame Fauvel ; "never!"

De Clameran paid no attention to this interruption, but went on : " If I insist upon this marriage, it is because it will re-establish your affairs, as well as ours. Of course, you see that the allowance you give your son is insufficient for his extravagant style of living. The time approaches when you will have nothing more to give him, and you will no longer be able to conceal from your husband your constant encroachments on the house-keeping money. When that day comes, what is to be done?"

Madame Fauvel shuddered. The dreaded day, of which the marquis spoke, could not be far off.

"Then," he continued, "you will render justice to my wise forethought, and to my good intentions. Mademoiselle Madeleine is rich ; her dowry will enable me to supply the deficit, and save you."

"I would rather be ruined than be saved by such means."

"But I will not permit you to ruin us all. Remember, madame, that we are associated in a common cause—Raoul's future welfare."

"Cease your importunities," she said, looking him steadily in the face. "I have made up my mind irrevocably."

"To what?"

"To do everything and anything to escape your shameful persecution. Oh ! you need not smile. I shall, if necessary, throw myself at M. Fauvel's feet, and confess everything. He loves me, and, knowing how I have suffered, will forgive me."

"Do you think so?" asked De Clameran, derisively.

"You mean to say that he will be pitiless, and banish me from his roof ! So be it ; it will only be what I deserve. There is no torture that I cannot bear, after what I have suffered through you."

This inconceivable resistance so upset all the marquis's plans that he lost all constraint, and, dropping the mask of politeness, appeared in his true character. "Indeed !" he said, in a fierce brutal tone ; "so you have decided to confess to your husband ! A famous idea ! What a pity you did not think of it before ! Confessing everything the first day I called on you, you might have been forgiven. Your husband might have pardoned a youthful fault, atoned for by twenty years of irreproachable conduct ; for none can deny that you have been a faithful wife and a good mother. But picture the indignation of your trusting husband, when you tell him that this pretended nephew—whom you impose upon his family circle, who sits at his table, who borrows his money—is your illegitimate son ! M. Fauvel is, no doubt, an excellent, kind-hearted man ; but I scarcely think he will pardon a deception of this nature, which betrays such depravity, duplicity, and audacity."

All that the angry marquis said was horribly true ; yet, Madame Fauvel listened unflinchingly.

"Upon my word," he went on, "you must be very much infatuated with this M. Bertomy ! Between the honour of your husband's name, and pleasing this love-sick cashier, you refuse to hesitate. Well, I suppose it will console you when M. Fauvel separates from you, and Abel and Lucien avert their faces at your approach, and blush at being your sons—it will be very sweet to be able to say : 'I have made Prosper happy !'"

"Happen what may, I shall do what is right," said Madame Fauvel.

"You shall do what I tell you!" cried De Clameran, threateningly. "Do you suppose that I will allow your sentimentality to blast all my hopes? Your niece's fortune is indispensable to us, and, more than that, I love the fair Madeleine."

The blow once struck, the marquis judged it prudent to await the result. With cool politeness, he added: "I will leave you now, madame, to think the matter over. Believe me, consent to this sacrifice—it will be the last required of you. Think of the honour of your family, and not of your niece's love affairs. I will call in three days for your answer."

"You will come uselessly, sir. I shall tell my husband everything, as soon as he returns."

If Madame Fauvel had not been so agitated herself, she would have detected an expression of alarm upon De Clameran's face. But this uneasiness was only momentary. With a shrug, which meant, "Just as you please," he said: "I think you have sense enough to keep your secret."

He bowed ceremoniously, and left the room, but slammed the door after him with a violence that betrayed the constraint he had imposed upon himself. De Clameran had cause for fear. Madame Fauvel's determination was not feigned. "Yes," she cried, with the enthusiasm of a noble resolution; "yes, I will tell André everything."

She believed herself to be alone, but turned round suddenly at the sound of footsteps, and found herself face to face with Madeleine, who was pale as a statue, and whose eyes were full of tears. "You must obey this man, aunt," she quietly said.

Adjoining the drawing-room were two little card-rooms, shut off only by heavy silk curtains. Madeleine, unknown to her aunt, was sitting in one of the little rooms when the marquis arrived, and had overheard the conversation.

"Good heavens!" cried Madame Fauvel with terror; "do you know—"

"I know everything, aunt."

"And you wish me to sacrifice you to this fiend?"

"I implore you to let me save you."

"You must certainly hate M. de Clameran."

"I hate him, aunt, and despise him. He will always be for me the basest of men; nevertheless I will marry him."

Madame Fauvel was overcome by the magnitude of this devotion. "And what is to become of Prosper, my poor child—Prosper, whom you love?"

Madeleine stifled a sob, and replied in a firm voice: "To-morrow I will break off my engagement with M. Bertomy."

"I will never permit such a wrong," cried Madame Fauvel. "I will not add to my sins by suffering an innocent girl to bear their penalty."

The noble girl sadly shook her head, and replied: "Neither will I suffer dishonour to fall upon this house, which is my home, while I have power to prevent it. Am I not indebted to you for more than life? What would I now be had you not taken pity on me? A factory girl in my native town. You warmly welcomed the poor orphan, and became a mother to her. Is it not to your husband that I owe the fortune which excites this villain's cupidity? Are not Abel and Lucien brothers to me? And now, when the happiness of us all is at stake, do you suppose I would hesitate? No. I will become the wife of De Clameran."

Then began a struggle of self-sacrifice between Madame Fauvel and her niece, as to which should be the victim; and all the more sublime, because

each offered her life to the other, not from any sudden impulse, but deliberately and willingly. But Madeleine was bound to triumph, fired as she was by that holy enthusiasm of sacrifice which makes martyrs.

"I am responsible to none but myself," said she, well knowing this to be the most vulnerable point she could attack; "whilst you, dear aunt, are accountable to your husband and children. Think of my uncle's pain and sorrow if he should ever learn the truth! It would kill him."

The generous girl was right. After having sacrificed her husband to her mother, Madame Fauvel was about to immolate her husband and children for Raoul. As a general thing, a first fault draws many others in its train. As an impalpable snowflake may be the beginning of an avalanche, so an imprudence is often the prelude to a great crime. To false situations there is but one safe issue—truth.

Madame Fauvel's resistance grew weaker and weaker. "But," she faintly argued, "I cannot accept your sacrifice. What sort of a life will you lead with this man?"

"We can hope for the best," replied Madeleine, with a cheerfulness she was far from feeling; "he loves me, he says; perhaps he will be kind to me."

"Ah, if I only knew where to obtain money! It is money that the grasping man wants; money alone will satisfy him."

"Does he not want it for Raoul? Has not Raoul, by his extravagant follies, dug an abyss which must be bridged over by money? If I could only believe M. de Clameran!"

Madame Fauvel looked at her niece with bewildered curiosity. What! this inexperienced girl had weighed the matter in its different lights before deciding upon a surrender; whereas, she, a wife and a mother, had blindly yielded to the inspirations of her heart! "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean this, aunt, that I do not believe that De Clameran has any thought of his nephew's welfare. Once in possession of my fortune, he may leave you and Raoul to your fates. And there is another dreadful suspicion that tortures my mind."

"A suspicion?"

"Yes, and I would reveal it to you, if I dared; if I did not fear that you—"

"Speak!" insisted Madame Fauvel. "Alas! misfortune has given me strength. I can fear nothing worse than what has already happened. I am ready to hear anything."

Madeleine hesitated; she wished to enlighten her credulous aunt, and yet feared to distress her. "I would like to be certain," she said, "that some secret understanding between M. de Clameran and Raoul does not exist, that they are not acting a part agreed upon between them beforehand."

Love is blind and deaf. Madame Fauvel no longer remembered the laughing eyes of the two men, upon the occasion of the pretended quarrel in her presence. She could not, she would not, believe in such hypocrisy. "It is impossible," she said; "the marquis is really indignant and distressed at his nephew's mode of life, and he certainly would never give him any bad advice. As to Raoul, he is vain, trifling, and extravagant; but he has a good heart. Prosperity has turned his head, but he loves me. Ah, if you could see and hear him, when I reproach him for his faults, your suspicions would fly to the winds. When he tearfully promises to be more prudent, he means to keep his word. If he breaks his promises, it is because perfidious friends lead him astray."

Mothers always blame their children's friends. The friend is the guilty one. Madeleine had not the heart to undeceive her aunt. "God grant that what you say may be true," she said; "if so, my marriage will not be useless. We will write to M. de Clameran to-night."

"Why to-night, Madeleine? We need not hurry so. Let us wait a little; something might happen to save us."

These words—this confidence in chance, in a mere nothing—revealed Madame Fauvel's true character, and accounted for her troubles. Timid, hesitating, easily swayed, she never could come to a firm decision, form a resolution, and abide by it, in spite of all arguments brought to bear against it. In the hour of peril she would always shut her eyes, and trust to chance for a relief which never came. Quite different was Madeleine's character. Beneath her gentle timidity, lay a strong, self-reliant will. Once decided upon a sacrifice, it was to be carried out to the letter; she shut out all deceitful illusions, and walked straight forward without one look back.

"We had better end the matter at once, dear aunt," she said, in a gentle but firm tone. "Believe me, the reality of misfortune is not as painful as its apprehension. You cannot bear the shocks of sorrow, and delusive hopes of happiness, much longer. Do you know what anxiety of mind has done to you? Have you looked in your mirror during the last four months?" She led her aunt up to a looking-glass, and said: "Look at yourself." Madame Fauvel was, indeed, a mere shadow of her former self. She had reached the perfidious age when a woman's beauty, like a full-blown rose, fades in a day. Four months of trouble had made her an old woman. Sorrow had stamped its fatal seal upon her brow. Her fair, soft skin was wrinkled, her hair was streaked with silver. "Do you not agree with me," continued Madeleine, pityingly, "that peace of mind is necessary to you? Do you not see that you are a wreck of your former self? Is it not a miracle that M. Fauvel has not noticed this sad change in you?" Madame Fauvel, who flattered herself that she had displayed wonderful dissimulation, shook her head. "Alas! my poor aunt! did I not discover that you had a secret?"

"You, Madeleine?"

"Yes! only I thought— Oh! pardon an unjust suspicion, but I was wicked enough to suppose—" She stopped, too distressed to finish her sentence; then, making a painful effort, she added: "I was afraid that perhaps you loved another man better than my uncle."

Madame Fauvel sobbed aloud. Madeleine's suspicion might be entertained by others. "My reputation is gone," she moaned.

"No, dear aunt, no," exclaimed the young girl, "do not be alarmed. Have courage: we two can fight now; we will defend ourselves, we will save ourselves."

The Marquis de Clameran was agreeably surprised that evening by receiving a letter from Madame Fauvel, saying that she consented to everything, but must have a little time to carry out the plan. Madeleine, she said, could not break off her engagement with M. Bertomy in a day. M. Fauvel would make objections, for he had an affection for Prosper, and had tacitly approved of the match. It would be wiser to leave to time the smoothing away of certain obstacles which a sudden attack might render insurmountable. A line from Madeleine, at the bottom of her letter, assured him of her consent.

Poor girl! she did not spare herself. The next day she took Prosper

aside, and forced from him the fatal promise to shun her in the future, and to take upon himself the responsibility of breaking their engagement. He implored Madeleine to at least explain the reason of this banishment, which destroyed all his hopes of happiness. She simply replied that her peace of mind and honour depended upon his obedience. He left her sick at heart. As he went out of the house, the marquis entered. Yes, he had the audacity to come in person, to tell Madame Fauvel that, now he had the promise of herself and Madeleine, he would consent to wait a while. He himself saw the necessity of patience, knowing that he was not liked by the banker. Having the aunt and niece in his power, he was certain of success. He said to himself that the moment would come when a deficit impossible to be replaced would force them to hasten the wedding. And Raoul did all he could to bring matters to a crisis. Madame Fauvel went sooner than usual to her country seat, and Raoul at once moved into his house at Vésinet. But living in the country did not lessen his expenses. Gradually he laid aside all hypocrisy, and now only came to see his mother when he wanted money; and his demands were frequent and more exorbitant each time. As for the marquis, he prudently absented himself, awaiting the propitious moment. And it was quite by chance that three weeks later, meeting the banker at a friend's, he was invited to dinner the next day.

Twenty people were seated at the table; and as the desert was being served, the banker suddenly turned to De Clameran and said: "I have a question to ask you, marquis. Have you any relatives bearing your name?"

"None that I know of, sir."

"I am surprised. About a week ago, I became acquainted with another Marquis de Clameran."

Although so hardened by crime, impudent enough to deny anything, De Clameran was taken aback and turned pale. "Oh, indeed! That is strange. A De Clameran may exist; but I cannot understand the title of marquis."

M. Fauvel was not sorry to have the opportunity of annoying a guest whose aristocratic pretensions had often piqued him. "Marquis or not," he replied, "the De Clameran in question seems to be able to do honour to the title."

"Is he rich?"

"I have reason to suppose that he is very wealthy. I have been authorised to collect for him four hundred thousand francs."

De Clameran had a wonderful faculty of self-control; he had so schooled himself that his face never betrayed what was passing in his mind. But this news was so startling, so strange, so pregnant of danger, that his usual assurance deserted him. He detected a peculiar look of irony in the banker's eye. The only persons who noticed this sudden change in the marquis's manner were Madeleine and her aunt. They saw him turn pale, and exchange a meaning look with Raoul.

"Then I suppose this new marquis is a merchant," said De Clameran, after a moment's pause.

"You ask too much. All that I know is, that four hundred thousand francs are to be deposited to his account by some ship-owners of Havre, after the sale of the cargo of a Brazilian ship."

"Then he comes from Brazil?"

"I do not know, but I can, if you like, give you his Christian name."

"I would be obliged."

M. Fauvel rose from the table, and brought from the next room a memorandum-book, and began to read over the names written in it.

"Wait a moment," he said: "let me see—the 22nd, no, it was later than that. Ah, here it is: De Clameran, Gaston. His name is Gaston."

But this time Louis betrayed no emotion or alarm; he had had sufficient time to recover his self-possession, and nothing could now throw him off his guard. "Gaston?" he queried carelessly. "I know who he is now. He must be the son of my father's sister, whose husband lived at Havana. I suppose, upon his return to France, he must have taken his mother's name, which is more sonorous than his father's, that being, if I recollect aright, Moirrot or Boirrot."

The banker laid down his memorandum-book, and, resuming his seat, said: "Boirrot or De Clameran, I hope to have the pleasure of inviting you to dine with him before long. Of the four hundred thousand francs which I was ordered to collect for him, he only wishes to draw one hundred, and tells me to keep the rest on current account. I judge from this, that he intends coming to Paris."

"I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

De Clameran broached another topic, and seemed to have entirely forgotten the news told him by the banker. Although apparently engrossed in the conversation at the table, he closely watched Madame Fauvel and her niece. He saw that they were unable to conceal their agitation, and stealthily exchanged significant looks. Evidently the same terrible idea had crossed their minds. Madeleine seemed more nervous and startled than her aunt. When M. Fauvel uttered Gaston's name, she saw Raoul begin to draw back his chair and glance in a frightened manner towards the window, like a detected thief looking for means of escape. Raoul, less experienced than his uncle, was thoroughly disconcerted. He, the original talker, the lion of a dinner-party, never at a loss for some witty speech, was now perfectly dumb; he sat anxiously watching Louis. At last the dinner ended, and as the guests passed into the drawing-rooms, De Clameran and Raoul managed to remain last in the dining-room. When they were alone, they no longer attempted to conceal their anxiety.

"It is he!" said Raoul.

"I have no doubt of it."

"Then all is lost; we had better make our escape."

But a bold adventurer like De Clameran had no idea of giving up the ship till forced to do so. "Who knows what may happen?" he asked thoughtfully. "There is hope yet. Why did not that muddle-headed banker tell us where this De Clameran is to be found?" Here he uttered a joyful exclamation. He saw M. Fauvel's memorandum-book lying on the side-board. "Watch!" he said to Raoul.

Seizing the note-book, he hurriedly turned over the leaves, and, in an undertone, read: "Gaston, Marquis de Clameran, Oloron, Lower Pyrenees."

"Well, does finding out his address assist us?" inquired Raoul eagerly.

"It may save us; that is all. Let us return to the drawing-room; our absence might be observed. Exert yourself to appear unconcerned and gay. You almost betrayed us once by your agitation."

"The two women suspect something."

"Well, suppose they do?"

"It is not safe for us here."

"Were you any better in London? Don't be so easily frightened. I am going to plant my batteries."

They joined the other guests. But, if their conversation had not been overheard, their movements had been watched. Madeleine had come on tip-toe, and, looking through the half-open door, had seen De Clameran consulting her uncle's note-book. But what benefit would she derive from this proof of the marquis's anxiety? She no longer doubted the villainy of the man to whom she had promised her hand. As he had said to Raoul, neither Madeleine nor her aunt could escape him. Two hours later, De Clameran was on the road to Vésinet with Raoul, explaining to him his plans.

"It is he, and no mistake," he said. "But we are too easily alarmed, my fine nephew."

"Nonsense! the banker is expecting him; he may be among us to-morrow."

"Don't be an idiot!" interrupted De Clameran. "Does he know that Fauvel is Valentine's husband? That is what we must find out. If he knows that little fact, we must take to our heels; if he is ignorant of it, our case is not desperate."

"How can we find out?"

"By simply going and asking him."

"That is a brilliant idea," said Raoul admiringly; "but dangerous."

"It is not as dangerous as not doing it. And, as to running away at the first suspicion of alarm, it would be downright imbecility."

"And who will go and see him?"

"I will!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Raoul in three different tones. De Clameran's audacity confounded him. "But what am I to do?" he inquired.

"You will oblige me by remaining here. At the least sign of danger, I will send you a telegram, and then you must make off."

As they parted at Raoul's door, De Clameran said: "It is then understood you will remain here. But mind, so long as my absence lasts, become once more the best of sons. Set yourself against me, calumniate me if you can. But no nonsense. No demands for money. So now, good-by! To-morrow night I shall be at Oloron and shall have seen this De Clameran."

XVIII.

AFTER leaving Valentine de La Verberie, Gaston underwent great peril and difficulty in effecting his escape. But for the experienced and faithful Menoul, he never would have succeeded in embarking. Having left his mother's jewels with Valentine, his sole fortune consisted of not quite a thousand francs; and it is not with a paltry sum like that that a fugitive who has just killed two men can pay for his passage on board a ship. But Menoul was a man of experience. While Gaston remained concealed in a farm house at Camargue, Menoul went to Marseilles, and the same evening learnt that a three-masted American vessel was in the roadstead, whose commander, Captain Warth, a not over-scrupulous person, would be glad to welcome on board an able-bodied man who would be of assistance to him at sea, and would not trouble himself about his antecedents. After visiting

the vessel and taking a glass of rum with the captain, old Menoul returned to Gaston.

"If it was a question of myself, sir," he said, "I should avail myself of the opportunity, but you—"

"What suits you, suits me," interrupted Gaston.

"You see, the fact is, you will be obliged to work very hard. You will only be a common sailor, you know! And I must confess that the ship's company is not the most moral one I ever saw. The captain, too, seems a regular swaggering bully."

"I have no choice," said Gaston. "I will go on board at once."

Old Menoul's suspicions were correct. Before Gaston had been on board the "Tom Jones" forty-eight hours, he saw that chance had cast him among a collection of the most depraved bandits and cut-throats. The crew, recruited seemingly anywhere, contained specimens of the rascals of almost every country. But Gaston's mind was undisturbed as to the character of the people with whom his lot was cast for several months. It was only his body that the vessel was carrying to another land. His heart and soul rested in the shady park of La Verberie, beside his beloved Valentine. And what would become of her now, poor child, when he was no longer there to love, console, and defend her? Happily, he had no time for sad reflections. His every moment was occupied in learning the rough apprenticeship of a sailor's life. All his energies were spent in bearing up under the heavy burden of labour allotted to him. This was his salvation. Physical suffering calmed and deadened his mental agony. The few hours relaxation granted him were spent in sleep. At rare intervals, when the weather was calm, and he was relieved from his constant occupation of trimming the sails, he would anxiously question the future. He had sworn that he would return before the end of three years, rich enough to satisfy the exactions of Madame de La Verberie. Would he be able to keep this boastful promise? Though desire has wings, reality crawls upon the ground. Judging from the conversation of his companions, he was not now on the road to the fortune he so much desired. The "Tom Jones" was sailing for Valparaiso, but certainly went in a roundabout way to reach her destination. The real fact was, that Captain Warth proposed visiting the Gulf of Guinea. A friend of his, a black prince, he said, with a loud laugh, was waiting for him at Badagri, to exchange a cargo of "ebony" for some pipes of rum, and a hundred flint-lock muskets which were on board. Gaston soon saw that he was serving his apprenticeship on one of the numerous slavers equipped yearly by the free and philanthropic Americans. Although this discovery filled Gaston with indignation and shame, he was prudent enough to conceal his impressions. His remonstrances, no matter how eloquent, would have made no change in Captain Warth's opinions regarding a traffic which brought him in more than cent. per cent., in spite of the French and English cruisers, the damages, sometimes entire loss of cargoes, and many other risks. The crew had a certain respect for Gaston when the story of his having killed two men, as related by Menoul to the captain, transpired. To have given vent to his feelings would have incurred the enmity of the whole of his shipmates, without bettering his own situation. He therefore kept quiet, but swore mentally, that he would desert on the first opportunity. This opportunity, like everything impatiently longed for, came not. By the end of three months Captain Warth found Gaston indispensable. Seeing him so intelligent he took a fancy to him, he liked to have him at his own table, he listened to his conversation with pleasure, and was glad

of his company in a game of cards. The mate of the ship dying, Gaston was chosen to replace him. In this capacity he made two successive voyages to Guinea, bringing back a thousand blacks, whom he superintended during a trip of fifteen hundred leagues, and finally landed clandestinely on the coast of Brazil. When Gaston had been about three years on board, the "Tom Jones" put into Rio Janeiro. He now had an opportunity of leaving the captain, who was after all a worthy man, and never would have engaged in the diabolical traffic of human beings, but for his little daughter's sake, his little Mary, an angel, whose dowry he wished to make a magnificent one. Gaston had saved twelve thousand francs out of his share of the profits, when he landed in Brazil. As a proof that the slave trade was repugnant to his nature he left the slaver the moment he possessed a little capital with which to enter some honest business. But he was no longer the high-minded, pure-hearted Gaston, who had been so beloved by the little fairy of La Verberie. It is useless to deny that evil examples are pernicious to morals. The most upright characters are unconsciously influenced by bad surroundings. As the exposure to rain, sun, and sea-air first darkened and then hardened his skin, so did wicked associates first shock and then destroy the refinement and purity of Gaston's mind. His heart had become as hard and coarse as his sailor hands. He still remembered Valentine, and sighed for her presence; but though she was still the most beloved, she was no longer the one woman in the world to him. However, the three years, after which he had pledged himself to return, had passed; perhaps Valentine was expecting him. Before deciding on any definite project, he wrote to an intimate friend at Beaucaire to learn what had happened during his long absence. He also wrote to his father, to whom he had already sent several letters, whenever he had an opportunity of doing so. At the end of a year, he received his friend's reply. It told him that his father was dead, that his brother had left France, that Valentine was married, and, finally, that he, Gaston, had been sentenced to several years' imprisonment for manslaughter. Henceforth he was alone in the world, with no country, disgraced by a public sentence. Valentine was married, and he had no further object in life! He would hereafter have faith in no one, since she, Valentine, had cast him off and forgotten him, had lacked the courage to keep her promise and wait for him. In his despair, he almost regretted the "Tom Jones." Yes, he sighed for the wicked slaver crew, his life of excitement and peril, the dangers and triumphs of those bold corsairs who die on sacks of dollars or strung up to the yard-arm.

But Gaston was not a man to be long cast down. "I will earn money, then," he cried with rage, "since money is the only thing in this world which never deceives!" And he set to work with a greedy activity, which increased every day. He tried all the many speculations open to adventurers. Alternately he traded in furs, worked a mine, and cultivated lands. Five times he went to bed rich, and waked up ruined; five times, with the patience of the beaver, whose hut is swept away by the current, he recommenced the building of his fortune. Finally, after long, weary years of toil and struggle, he was worth about a million in gold, besides immense tracts of land. He had often said that he would never leave Brazil, that he wanted to end his days in Rio. He had forgotten that love for his native land never dies in a Frenchman's breast. Now that he was rich, he wished to die in France. He made inquiries, and found that the law of limitations would permit him to return without being disturbed by the authorities. He realised what he could of his property, and, leaving the rest in charge

of an agent, he embarked for France. Twenty-three years and four months had elapsed since he fled from home, when, on a bright day in January, 1866, he stood upon the quays at Bordeaux. He had departed a young man, with his heart brimful of hope ; he returned gray-haired, and believing in nothing. His health, too, on his arrival, began to suffer from the sudden change of climate. Rheumatism confined him to his bed for several months. As soon as he could sit up, the physicians sent him to some baths, where they said he would regain his health. When cured, he felt that inactivity would kill him. Charmed with the beauty of the Pyrenees, and the lovely valley of Aspe, he resolved to take up his abode there. An iron-foundry was for sale near Oloron, on the banks of the Gave ; he bought it with the intention of utilising the immense quantity of wood, which, for want of means of transport, was wasting in the mountains.

He had been settled some weeks in his new home, when one evening his servant brought him the card of a stranger who desired to see him. He read the name on the card : *Louis de Clameran*. Many years had passed since Gaston had experienced such violent agitation. His blood rushed to his head, and he trembled like a leaf. The old home affections which he thought dead now sprung up anew in his heart. A thousand confused memories rushed through his mind. Words rose to his lips, but he was unable to utter them. "My brother !" he at length gasped, "my brother !" Hurriedly passing by the frightened servant, he ran down stairs. In the hall a man, Louis de Clameran, stood waiting. Gaston threw his arms round his neck and held him in a close embrace for some minutes, and then drew him into a room. Seated close beside Louis, and tightly clasping his two hands, Gaston gazed on his face as a fond mother would gaze at her son just returned from the battle-field.

"And is this really Louis ?" he cried. "My dearly loved brother ? Why, I should have recognised you among a thousand ; the expression of your face has not in the least changed, your smile is the same as it used to be."

Louis did indeed smile, just as he perhaps smiled on that fatal night when his horse stumbled, and prevented Gaston's escape. He smiled now as if he was perfectly happy ; he seemed overjoyed. He had exerted all the courage he possessed to venture upon this meeting. Nothing but the most terrible necessity would have induced him to present himself thus. His teeth chattered and he trembled in every limb when he rang Gaston's bell, and handed the servant his card, saying, "Take this to your master." The few moments that elapsed before Gaston's appearance seemed to him centuries. He said to himself, "Perhaps it is not he. And if it is, does he know ? Does he suspect any thing ?" He was so anxious that, when he saw Gaston rushing down stairs, he felt like fleeing from the house. Not knowing the nature of Gaston's feelings towards him, he stood perfectly motionless. But one glance at his brother's face convinced him that he was the same affectionate, credulous, trusting Gaston of old ; and, now that he was almost certain that his brother harboured no suspicions, he recovered himself and smiled.

"After all," continued Gaston, "I am not alone in the world ; I shall have some one to love, some one to care for me." Then, as if suddenly struck by a thought, he asked, "Are you married, Louis ?"

"No."

"That is a pity, a great pity. It would so have added to my happiness to see you the husband of a good, affectionate woman, the father of bright,

lovely children ! It would have been a comfort to have had a happy family about me. I should have looked upon them all as my own. To live alone, without a loving wife to share one's joys and sorrows, is not living at all. Oh the sadness of having only one's self to care for ! But what am I saying ? I have you, Louis, and is not that enough ? I have a brother, a friend with whom I can talk aloud, as I have for so long talked to myself."

"Yes, Gaston, yes, a good friend !"

"Of course ! for are you not my brother ? So you are not married ! Then we will keep house together. We will live like two old bachelors, as we are, and be as happy as kings ; we will amuse each other, we will thoroughly enjoy ourselves. What a capital idea ! You make me feel young again, barely twenty. I feel as active and strong as I did the night I swam across the swollen Rhone. And that was long, long ago ; and since, I have struggled, I have suffered, I have cruelly aged and changed."

"You !" interrupted Louis ; "why, you have not aged as much as I have."

"You are jesting."

"I assure you."

"Would you have recognised me !"

"Instantly. You are very little changed."

And Louis was right. He himself had a worn-out, used-up appearance rather than an aged one ; while Gaston, in spite of his gray hair and weather-beaten face, was a robust man, in his prime. It was a relief to turn from Louis's restless eyes and crafty smiles to Gaston's frank, honest face.

"But," said Gaston, "how did you know that I was living ? What kind fairy guided you to my house ?"

Louis was prepared for this question. During his eighteen hours' ride in the train he had had time to arrange all his answers. "We must thank Providence for this happy meeting," he replied. "Three days ago, a friend of mine returned from some baths, and mentioned that he had heard that a Marquis de Clameran was near there, in the Pyrenees. You can imagine my surprise. I instantly supposed that some impostor had assumed our name. I took the next train, and finally found my way here."

"Then you did not expect to see me ?"

"My dear brother, how could I hope for that ? I thought that you were drowned twenty-three years ago."

"Drowned ! Mademoiselle de La Verberie certainly told you of my escape. She promised that she would go herself, the next day, and tell my father of my safety."

Louis assumed a distressed look, as if he hesitated to tell the sad truth, and murmured in a regretful tone : "Alas ! she never told us."

Gaston's eyes flashed with indignation. He thought that perhaps Valentine had been glad to get rid of him. "She did not tell you ?" he exclaimed. "Did she have the cruelty to let you mourn my death ? to let my old father die of a broken heart ? Ah ! she must have been very fearful of the world's opinion. She sacrificed me, then, for the sake of her reputation."

"But why did you not write to us ?" asked Louis.

"I did write as soon as I had an opportunity ; and Lafourcade wrote back, saying that my father was dead, and that you had left the neighbourhood."

"I left Clameran because I believed you to be dead."

Gaston rose, and walked up and down the room as if to shake off a feeling

of sadness ; then he said cheerfully : " Well, it's of no use mourning over the past. All the memories in the world, good or bad, are not worth one slender hope for the future ; and thank heaven, we have a bright future before us."

Louis was silent. His footing was not sure enough to risk any questions.

" But here I have been talking incessantly for an hour," said Gaston, " and I daresay that you have not dined."

" No, I have not, I own."

" Why did you not say so before ? I forgot that I had not dined myself. I will not let you starve, the first day of your arrival. Ah ! I have some splendid old Cape wine."

He pulled the bell, and ordered the servant to hasten dinner : and within half-an-hour the two brothers were seated at a sumptuous repast. Gaston kept up an uninterrupted stream of questions. He wished to know all that had happened during his absence.

" What about Clameran ?" he abruptly asked.

Louis hesitated a moment. Should he tell the truth, or not ? " I have sold Clameran," he finally said.

" The château, too ?"

" Yes."

" You acted as you thought best," said Gaston, sadly ; " but it seems to me that, if I had been in your place, I should have kept the old homestead. Our ancestors lived there for many generations, and our father died there." Then seeing Louis appeared sad and distressed, he quickly added : " However, it is just as well ; it is in the heart that memory dwells, and not in a pile of old stones. I myself had not the courage to return to Provence. I could not trust myself to go to Clameran, where I would have to gaze on the park of La Verberie. Alas, the only happy moments of my life were spent there !"

Louis's countenance immediately cleared. The certainty that Gaston had not been to Provence relieved his mind of an immense weight. The next day he telegraphed to Raoul : " Wisdom and prudence. Follow my directions. All goes well. Be sanguine."

All was going well ; and yet Louis, in spite of his skilfully plied questions, had obtained none of the information which he had come to seek. Gaston was communicative on every subject except the one in which Louis was most interested. Was this silence premeditated, or simply unconscious ? Louis, like all villains, was ever ready to attribute to others the bad motives by which he himself would be influenced. Anything was better than this uncertainty ; he determined to ask his brother what he intended doing. They had just sat down to lunch, and he thought the moment an opportune one.

" Do you know, my dear Gaston," he began by saying ; " that thus far we have spoken of everything except serious matters ?"

" Why do you look so solemn, Louis ! What are the grave subjects you allude to ?"

" Well, there is this : believing you to be dead, I inherited all our father left."

" Is that what you call a serious matter ?" asked Gaston with an amused smile.

" Certainly. I owe you an account of your share ; you have a right to half."

" I have," interrupted Gaston, " a right to ask you never to allude to the subject again. What you have is yours by limitation."

"No, I cannot accept it."

"But you must. Our father wished to have only one of us to inherit his property; we will be carrying out his wishes by not dividing it." Seeing that Louis's face still remained clouded, Gaston added: "Come now, you must be very rich, or think me very poor, to insist thus."

Louis started at this remark. What could he say so as not to commit himself?

"I am neither rich nor poor," he finally observed.

"I am delighted to hear it," exclaimed his brother. "I wish you were as poor as Job, so that I might share what I have with you."

Luncheon over, Gaston rose and said: "Come, I want to show you my—that is, our property."

Louis uneasily followed. It seemed to him that Gaston obstinately shunned anything like an explanation. Could all this brotherly affection be assumed to blind him as to his real plans? Louis's fears were again aroused, and he almost regretted his hasty telegram. But his calm, smiling face betrayed none of the anxious thoughts which filled his mind. He was called upon to examine everything. First he was taken over the house and then the servants' quarters, the stables, kennels, and the vast, beautifully laid-out garden. Across a pretty meadow was the iron-foundry in full operation. Gaston, with all the enthusiasm of a new proprietor, explained everything, down to the smallest file and hammer. He detailed all his projects; how he intended substituting wood for coal, and how, besides having plenty to work the forge, he could make immense profits by felling the forest trees, which had hitherto been considered impracticable. Louis approved of everything; but only answered in monosyllables, "Ah, indeed! excellent idea! quite a success!" His mind was tortured by a new pain; he was paying no attention to Gaston's remarks, but enviously comparing all this wealth and prosperity with his own poverty. He found Gaston rich, respected, and happy, enjoying the price of his own industry; whilst he—Never had he so cruelly felt the misery of his condition, which was of his own making. After a lapse of twenty-three years, all the envy and hate he had felt towards Gaston, when they were boys together, revived.

"What do you think of my purchase?" asked Gaston, when the inspection was over.

"I think you possess, my dear brother, a most charming property, situated in the loveliest spot in the world. It is enough to excite the envy of any poor Parisian."

"Do you really think so?"

"Certainly."

"Then, my dear Louis," said Gaston joyfully, "this property is yours, as well as mine. You like it, then live here always. Do you really care for your foggy Paris? Do you not prefer this beautiful Béara sky? The scanty and paltry luxury of Paris is not equal to the good and plentiful living you will find here. You are a bachelor, therefore you have no ties. Remain, we shall want for nothing. And, to employ our time, there is the foundry. Does my plan suit you?"

Louis was silent. A year ago, this proposal would have been eagerly welcomed. How gladly he would have seized this offer of a comfortable, luxurious home, after having been buffeted about the world so long! How delightful it would have been to turn over a new leaf, and become an honest man! But he saw, with disappointment and rage, that he would now be

compelled to decline it. No, he was no longer free. He could not leave Paris. He had become entangled in one of those hazardous plots which are lost if neglected, and the loss of which generally leads the projector into penal servitude. Alone, he could easily remain where he was ; but he was trammelled with an accomplice.

"You do not answer me," said Gaston, with surprise ; "are there any obstacles to my plans ?"

"None."

"What is the matter, then ?"

"The matter is, my dear brother, that the salary of an appointment which I hold in Paris is all that I have to support me."

"Is that your only objection ? Yet, you just now wanted to pay me back half of the family inheritance ! Louis, that is unkind ; you are not acting as a brother should."

Louis hung his head. Gaston was unconsciously telling the truth. "I should be a burden to you, Gaston."

"A burden ! Why, Louis, you must be mad ! Did I not tell you I was very rich ! Do you suppose that you have seen all I possess ? This house and the iron-works do not constitute a fourth of my fortune. Do you think that I would have risked my twenty years' savings in an experiment of this sort ? I have invested, in state securities, an income of twenty-four thousand francs. And that is not all ; it seems that I shall be able to sell my grants in Brazil ; I am lucky ! My agent has already forwarded me four hundred thousand francs."

Louis trembled with pleasure. He was, at last, to know the extent of the danger menacing him. "What agent ?" he asked, with assumed indifference.

"Why, my old partner at Rio, of course. The money is now at my Paris banker's, quite at my disposal."

"Some friend of yours ?"

"Well, no. He was recommended to me by my banker at Pau, as a very rich, prudent, and reliable man. His name is—let me see—André Fauvel, and he lives in the Rue de Provence."

Master of himself as he was, and prepared for what he was about to hear, Louis turned pale and red by turns.

"Do you know this banker ?" asked Gaston, who, full of his own thoughts, did not notice his brother's condition.

"Only by reputation."

"Then, we can shortly make his acquaintance together ; for I think of accompanying you to Paris, when you return there to wind up your affairs, before establishing yourself here."

At this unexpected announcement of a step which would prove his utter ruin, Louis managed to maintain his self-possession. It seemed to him that his brother was looking him through and through. "You are going to Paris ?" he uttered.

"Certainly I am. What is there extraordinary in that ?"

"Oh ! nothing."

"I hate Paris, although I have never been there ; but I am called there by interest, by sacred duties," he hesitatingly said. "The truth is, I understand that Mademoiselle de La Verberie lives in Paris, and I wish to see her again."

"Ah !"

Gaston was silent and thoughtful for some moments, and then resumed,

nervously, "I can tell you, Louis, why I wish to see her. When I went away, I left our mother's jewels in her keeping."

"And you intend, after a lapse of twenty-three years, to claim these jewels?"

"Yes—or rather no; that is only a vain excuse for seeing her, with which I try to satisfy myself. I must see her, because—because—I loved her; that is the truth."

"But how will you find her?"

"Oh! that is easy enough. Any one almost can tell me her husband's name, and then I will go to see her. I will write to-morrow, to Beaucaire, for the information."

Louis made no reply. Men of his character, when brought face to face with imminent danger, always weigh their words, and say as little as possible, for fear of committing themselves by some indiscreet remark. Above all things, Louis was careful to avoid raising any objections to his brother's proposed trip to Paris. To oppose a man's wishes has generally the effect of fixing them more firmly in his mind. Each argument is like striking a nail with a hammer. Knowing this, Louis changed the conversation, and nothing more during the day was said of Valentine or Paris. At night, alone in his room, he brought his cunning mind to bear upon the difficulties of his situation, and wondered by what means he could extricate himself. At first sight, it seemed hopeless. During the twenty years Louis had been at war with society, trusted by none, living upon his wits and the credulity of foolish men, he had, many a time, found himself in a desperate position. He had been caught at the gaming-table with his hands full of marked cards; he had been tracked all over Europe by the police, and obliged to fly from city to city under an assumed name; he had sold to cowards his skilful handling of the sword and pistol; he had been thrown into a prison, and had miraculously made his escape. He had braved everything, and feared nothing. He had often conceived and carried out the most criminal plans, without the slightest hesitation or remorse. And now, here he sat, utterly bewildered—unable to think clearly; his usual impudence and ready cunning seemed to have deserted him. Thus driven into a corner, he saw no means of escape, and was almost tempted to give in, and retire from the struggle. He asked himself if it would not be wiser to borrow a large sum from Gaston, and fly the country. Vainly did he think over the wicked experience of the past; none of his former successful stratagems could be resorted to in the present case. Fatally, inevitably, he was about to be caught in a trap laid by himself. The future was fraught with ruin and disgrace. He had to fear the wrath of M. Fauvel, his wife, and niece. Gaston would have speedy vengeance the moment he discovered the truth; and Raoul, his accomplice, would certainly turn against him in the hour of misfortune, and become his most implacable enemy. Was there no possible way of preventing a meeting between Valentine and Gaston? No, none that he could think of. And their meeting would be his destruction.

Lost in reflection, he paid no attention to the flight of time. Daybreak found him sitting at the window, exposing to the morning breeze his burning brow, which seemed on the point of bursting. "It is useless for me to think," he muttered. "There is nothing to be done but gain time, and wait for an opportunity." The fall of the horse at Clameran was, no doubt, what Louis called "an opportunity." He closed the window, threw himself upon the bed, and so accustomed was he to danger, that he soon slept. At

the breakfast-table, his calm, smiling face bore no traces of a wakeful, anxious night. He was in a gayer, more talkative, and affectionate mood than usual, and said he would like to ride about the country. Before leaving the table, he had planned several excursions in the neighbourhood. The truth is, he hoped to keep Gaston so amused and occupied, that he would forget all about going to Paris in search of Valentine. He thought that, with time, and skilfully put objections, he could dissuade his brother from seeking out his former love. He relied upon being able to convince him that this absolutely unnecessary interview would be painful to both, embarrassing to him, and dangerous to her. As to the jewels, if Gaston persisted in claiming them, Louis could safely offer to go and get them for him, as he well knew where they were. But his hopes and plans were soon scattered to the winds.

"You know," said Gaston, one morning, "I have written."

Louis knew well enough to what he alluded, but pretended to be very much surprised, and said, "Written? To whom? Where? What for?"

"To Beaucaire, to ask Lafourcade the name of Valentine's husband."

"You are, then, still thinking of her?"

"Always."

"You have not given up your idea of going to see her?"

"Not in the least."

"Alas! brother, you forget that she whom you once loved is now the wife of another, and possibly the mother of a family. How do you know that she will consent to see you? Why run the risk of destroying her domestic happiness, and planting seeds of remorse in your own bosom?"

"I know I am a fool, but my folly is dear to me."

The quiet determination of Gaston's tone convinced Louis that all remonstrances would be unavailing. Yet, he remained the same in his manner and behaviour, apparently engrossed in pleasure parties; but, in reality, his only thought was of the letters delivered at the house. He always managed to be near the door when the postman came. When he and Gaston were out together at the time of the postman's visit, he would hurry into the house first, so as to look over the letters delivered in their absence. His watchfulness was at last rewarded. The following Sunday, among the letters handed to him by the postman, was one bearing the postmark of Beaucaire. He quickly slipped it into his pocket; and, although he was on the point of mounting his horse to ride with Gaston, he found a pretext for running up to his room, so as to gratify his impatient desire to read the letter. He tore it open, and, seeing "Lafourcade" signed at the bottom of three closely-written pages, hastily devoured the contents. After reading a detailed account of events entirely uninteresting to him, Louis came to the following passage relating to Valentine:—"Mademoiselle de La Verberie's husband is an eminent banker, named André Fauvel. I have not the honour of his acquaintance, but I intend going to see him shortly. I am anxious to submit to him a project that I have conceived for the benefit of this part of the country. If he approves of it, I shall ask him to invest in it, as his name will be of great assistance to the scheme. I suppose you have no objections to my mentioning your name as a reference." Louis trembled like a man who had just had a narrow escape from death. He well knew that he would have to fly, if Gaston received this letter. But though the danger was warded off for the while, it might return and destroy him at any moment. Gaston would wait a week or so for an answer, then he would write again; Lafourcade would instantly reply to

express surprise that his first letter had not been received ; all this correspondence would occupy, at the most, not more than twelve days. And then, Lafourcade's visit to Paris was another source of danger, for the instant he mentioned the name of De Clameran to the banker, everything would be discovered.

But Gaston was getting tired of waiting. "Are you coming?" he cried. "I am coming now," replied Louis.

Hastily thrusting Lafourcade's letter into a secret compartment of his trunk, Louis ran down to his brother. He had made up his mind to borrow a large sum from Gaston, and go off to America ; and Raoul might get out of the scrape as best he could. The only thing which he regretted was the sudden failure of the most skilful combination he had ever conceived ; but he was not a man to fight against destiny, so he determined to make the best of the emergency, and hope for better fortune in his next scheme. The following day, about dusk, while walking along the pretty road leading from the foundry to Oloron, he commenced the prologue of a little story, which was to conclude by asking Gaston to lend him two hundred thousand francs. As they went slowly along, arm in arm, about half a mile from the foundry they met a young labourer, who bowed as he passed them. Louis started back so violently that his brother asked him in surprise what was the matter.

"Nothing, except I struck my foot against a stone, and it hurt me."

Gaston might have known, by the tremulous tones of Louis's voice, that this was a lie. Louis de Clameran had reason to tremble, for in the workman he recognised Raoul de Lagors. Instinctive fear paralysed and overwhelmed him. His volubility was gone ; and he silently walked along by his brother's side, like an automaton, totally incapable of thinking or acting for himself. He seemed to listen—he did listen ; but the words fell upon his ear unmeaningly ; he could not understand what Gaston was saying, and mechanically answered "yes" or "no," like one in a dream. Whilst necessity—absolute necessity—kept him at Gaston's side, his thoughts were all with the young man who had just passed by. What had brought Raoul to Oloron ? What plot was he hatching ? Why was he disguised as a labourer ? Why had he not answered the many letters which Louis had written him from Oloron ? He had ascribed this silence to Raoul's carelessness, but now he saw it was premeditated. Something disastrous must have happened at Paris ; and Raoul, afraid to commit himself by writing, had come himself to bring the bad news. Had he come to say that the game was up, and they must fly ? But, after all, he might have been mistaken. Perhaps it was some workman bearing a strong resemblance to Raoul. If he could only run after the stranger, and speak to him ! His anxiety increased, minute by minute, and at length became intolerable. Fortunately, Gaston was rather tired that evening, and returned home much earlier than usual. He went to his own room at once. At last, Louis was free ! He lit a cigar, and, telling the servant not to sit up for him, went out. He expected that Raoul, if it was Raoul, would be prowling near the house, waiting for him. He was not mistaken. He had hardly proceeded thirty yards, when a man suddenly sprang from behind a tree, and stood before him. The night was clear, and Louis at once recognised Raoul.

"What is the matter?" he impatiently demanded ; "what has happened?"

"Nothing."

"What! Do you mean to say that nothing has gone wrong in Paris?"

"Nothing whatever. I will add, too, that, but for your inordinate greed of gain, everything would be going on swimmingly."

"Then, why have you come here?" cried Louis, fiercely. "Who gave you permission to desert your post, at the risk of ruining us both?"

"That is my business," said Raoul, coolly.

Louis seized the young man's wrists, and almost crushed them in his vice-like grasp. "Explain this strange conduct of yours," he exclaimed, in a tone of suppressed rage.

Without apparent effort, Raoul released his hands from their imprisonment, and jeeringly said: "Gently, my friend! I don't like being roughly treated, and I have other means of answering you." At the same time, he drew a revolver from his pocket.

"You must and shall explain yourself," insisted Louis; "if you don't—"

"Well, if I don't? Now, you might just as well spare yourself the trouble of trying to frighten me. I intend to answer your questions when I choose; but it certainly won't be here, in the middle of the road, with the bright moonlight showing us off to advantage. How do you know people are not watching us this very minute? Come this way."

They strode through the fields, regardless of the plants, which they trampled under foot in order to take a short cut.

"Now," began Raoul, when they were at a safe distance from the road, "now, my dear uncle, I will tell you what brings me here. I have received and carefully read your letters, and read them more than once. You wished to be prudent, and the consequence was that your letters were unintelligible. Only one thing did I understand clearly: we are in danger."

"Only the more reason for your watchfulness and obedience."

"Very well put. Only, before braving danger, my venerable and beloved uncle, I want to know its extent. I am not a man to retreat in the hour of peril, but I want to know exactly how much risk I am running."

"Did I not tell you to keep quiet?"

"But to do this would imply that I have perfect confidence in you, my dear uncle," said Raoul, sneeringly.

"And why should you not? What reasons for distrust have you, after all that I have done for you? Who went to London, and rescued you from a state of privation and ignominy? I did. Who gave you a name and position when you had neither? I did. And who is working even now to maintain your present life of ease, and insure you a splendid future? I am."

"Superb, magnificent, inimitable!" said Raoul with mocking admiration.

"But, while on the subject, why don't you prove that you have sacrificed yourself for my sake? You did not need me as a tool for carrying out plans for your own benefit; did you? oh no, not at all! Dear, kind, generous, disinterested uncle! You ought to have the Montyon prize; I must recommend you for it."

De Clameran was so enraged that he feared to trust himself to speak.

"Now, my good uncle," continued Raoul more seriously, "we had better end this child's play, and come to a clear understanding. I followed you here, because I thoroughly understand your character, and have just as much confidence in you as you deserve, and not a particle more. If it were for your advantage to ruin me, you would not hesitate one instant. If danger threatened us, you would fly alone, and leave your dutiful nephew to make his escape the best way he could. Oh! don't look shocked, and

pretend to deny it; your conduct is perfectly natural, and in your place I would act the same way. Only remember this, that I am not a man to be trifled with. Now let us cease these unnecessary recriminations, and come to the point: what has been happening here?"

Louis saw that his accomplice was too shrewd to be deceived, and that the safest course was to trust all to him, and to pretend that he had intended doing so all along. Without any show of anger, he briefly and clearly related all that had occurred at his brother's. He told the truth about everything except the amount of his brother's fortune, the importance of which he lessened as much as possible.

"Well," said Raoul, when the report was ended, "we are in a nice fix. And you expect to get out of it, do you?"

"Yes, if you don't betray me."

"I wish you to understand, marquis, that I have never betrayed any one yet. What steps will you take to get free of this entanglement?"

"I don't know yet; but something will turn up. Oh, don't be alarmed; I'll find some means of escape: so you can return home with your mind at rest. You run no risk in Paris, and I will stay here to watch Gaston."

Raoul reflected for some moments, and then said: "Are you sure I am out of danger in Paris?"

"What are you afraid of? We have Madame Fauvel so completely in our power that she would not dare speak a word against us, even if she knew the whole truth, which no one but you and I know: she would not open her lips, but be only too glad to hush up matters so as to escape punishment for her fault from her deceived husband and a censuring world."

"That is so. I know we have a secure hold on her," said Raoul. "It is not of her I am afraid."

"Of whom, then?"

"An enemy of your own making, my respected uncle, a most implacable enemy—Madeleine."

"Fiddlesticks!" replied De Clameran disdainfully.

"It is all very well for you to treat her with contempt," said Raoul gravely; "but I can tell you, you are much mistaken in your estimate of her character. I have studied her lately, and see that she has devoted herself to save her aunt; but she has not given in. She has promised to marry you, she has discarded Prosper, who is broken-hearted, it is true; but she has not given up hope. You imagine her to be weak and yielding, easily frightened? It's a great mistake: she is self-reliant and fearless. More than that, she is in love, my good uncle; and a woman will defend her love as a tigress defends her young. There is the danger."

"She is worth five hundred thousand francs."

"So she is; and at five per cent. we would each have an income of twelve thousand five hundred francs. But, for all that, you had better take my advice, and give up Madeleine."

"Never, I swear by heaven!" exclaimed De Clameran. "Rich or poor, she shall be mine! I first wanted her for her money, but now I want her—I love her for herself, Raoul!"

Raoul seemed to be amazed at this declaration of his uncle. He raised his hands, and started back with astonishment. "Is it possible," he said, "that you are in love with Madeleine?—you!"

"Yes," replied Louis in a tone of suspicion. "Is there anything so very extraordinary in it?"

"Oh, no; certainly not! only this sentimental state you are in explains

your strange behaviour. So, you love Madeleine ! Then, my venerable uncle, we may as well surrender at once."

"Why so?"

"Because you know the axiom, 'When the heart is interested, the head is lost.' Generals in love always lose their battles. The day is not far off when your infatuation for Madeleine will make you sell us both for a smile. And, mark my words, she is shrewd, and watching us as only an enemy can watch."

With a forced laugh De Clameran interrupted his nephew.

"Just see how you fire up for nothing," he said. "You must dislike the charming Madeleine then very much."

"She will prove to be our ruin ; that is all."

"You might as well be frank, and say you are in love with her yourself."

"I am only in love with her money," retorted Raoul with an angry frown.

"Then what are you complaining of? I shall give you half her fortune. You will have the money without being troubled with the wife ; the profit without the burden."

"I am not over fifty years old," said Raoul conceitedly.

"Enough of this," interrupted Louis, angrily. "The day I relieved your pressing wants, and brought you to Paris, it was agreed that I should be the master."

"Yes ; but you forget that my liberty, perhaps my life, is at stake. You may hold the cards, but I must have the right of advising you."

It was midnight before the accomplices separated. "It won't do to stand idle," said Louis. "I agree with you that something must be done at once ; but I can't decide what it shall be on the spur of the moment. Meet me here at this hour, to-morrow night, and I will have some plan ready for you."

"Very good. I will be here."

"And remember, don't be imprudent !"

"My costume ought to convince you that I am not anxious to be recognised by any one. I left such an ingenious alibi, that I defy anybody to prove that I have been absent from my house at Vésinet. I even took the precaution of travelling here third-class. Well, good night : I am going to the inn."

Raoul went off after these words, apparently unconscious of having aroused suspicion in the breast of his accomplice. During his adventurous life, De Clameran had transacted "business" with too many scamps not to know the precise amount of confidence to place in a man like Raoul. The old adage, "Honour among thieves," seldom holds good after the "stroke." There is always a quarrel over the division of the spoils. The distrustful De Clameran foresaw already a thousand reasons for fear and disputes. "Why," he pondered, "did Raoul assume this disguise? Why this alibi at Paris? Can he be laying a trap for me? It is true that I have a hold upon him ; but then I am completely at his mercy. Those accursed letters which I have written to him, while here, are so many proofs against me. Can he be thinking of cutting loose from me, and making off with all the profits of our enterprise?"

Louis never once during the night closed his eyes ; but by daybreak he had fully made up his mind how to act, and with feverish impatience waited for night. His anxiety made him so restless, that the unobserving Gaston finally noticed it, and asked him what the matter was ; if he was

ill, or troubled about anything. At last evening came, and Louis was able to rejoin Raoul, whom he found lying on the grass smoking in the field where they had talked on the preceding evening.

"Well," he carelessly asked, as Louis approached, "have you decided upon anything?"

"Yes, I have two projects, either of which is, I think, sure of success."

"I am listening."

Louis was silent for a minute, as if arranging his thoughts so as to present them as clearly and briefly as possible. "My first plan," he began, "depends upon your approval. What would you say, if I proposed to you to give up the affair altogether?"

"What!"

"Would you consent to disappear, leave France, and return to London, if I paid you a good round sum?"

"What do you call a good round sum?"

"I could give you a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"My respected uncle," said Raoul, with a contemptuous shrug, "I am distressed to see how little you know me! You try to deceive me, to outwit me, which is ungenerous and foolish on your part—ungenerous, because it fails to carry out our agreement; foolish, because, as you ought to know by now, my power equals yours."

"I don't understand you."

"I am sorry for it. I understand myself, and that is sufficient. Oh, I know you, my dear uncle! I have watched you with careful eyes, which are not to be deceived; I see through you clearly. If you offer me one hundred and fifty thousand francs, it is because you intend to walk off with a million for yourself."

"You are talking like a fool," said De Clameran, with virtuous indignation.

"Not at all; I only judge the future by the past. Of all the large sums extorted from Madame Fauvel, often against my wishes, I have scarcely received a tenth part."

"But you know we have a reserve fund."

"All very good; but you have the keeping of it, my good uncle. If our little plot were to be discovered to-morrow, you would walk off with the money-box, and leave your devoted nephew to be sent to prison."

"Ungrateful fellow!" muttered Louis, as if distressed at these undeserved reproaches.

"Bravo!" cried Raoul; "you said it splendidly. But we have not time for this nonsense. I will end the matter by proving how you have been trying to deceive me."

"I would like to hear you do so, if you can."

"Very good. In the first place, you told me that your brother only possessed a modest competency. Now, I learn that Gaston has an income of at least sixty thousand francs; it is useless for you to deny it. And how much is this property worth? A hundred thousand crowns. He has four hundred thousand francs deposited in M. Fauvel's bank. Total, seven hundred thousand francs. And besides all this, the broker in Oloron has instructions to buy up a large amount of government stock for him. I have not wasted my day, as you see."

Raoul's information was too concise and exact for Louis to deny it.

"You might have sense enough," Raoul went on, "to know how to manage your forces if you undertake to be a commander. We had a

splendid game in our hands ; and you, who held the cards, have made a perfect muddle of it."

"I think —"

"That the game is lost? That is my opinion too, and all through you."

"I could not control events."

"Yes, you could, if you had been shrewd. Fools sit down and wait for an opportunity ; sensible men make one. What did we agree upon in London? We were to implore my good mother to assist us a little, and if she complied with our wishes, we were to be flattering and affectionate in our devotion to her ; but, at the risk of killing the golden goose, you have made me torment the poor woman, until she is almost crazy."

"It was prudent to hasten matters."

"You think so, do you? Was it also to hasten matters that you took it into your head to marry Madeleine? That made it necessary to let her into the secret ; and, ever since, she has advised and set her aunt against us. I would not be surprised if she makes her confess everything to M. Fauvel, or even inform against us at the Préfecture of Police."

"I love Madeleine !"

"You told me that before. And suppose you do love her. You led me into this piece of business without having studied its various bearings—without knowing what you were about. No one but an idiot, my beloved uncle, would go and put his foot into a trap, and then say, 'If I had only known about it!' You should have made it your business to know everything. You came to me, and said, 'Your father is dead.' But not at all, he is living : and, after what we have done, I dare not appear before him. He would have left me a million, and now I shall not get a sou. He will find his Valentine, and then good-bye."

"Enough !" angrily interrupted Louis. "If I have made a mistake, I know how to redeem it. I can save everything yet."

"You can? How so?"

"That is my secret," said Louis, gloomily.

Louis and Raoul were silent for a minute ; and this silence between them, in this lonely spot, at dead of night, was so horribly significant, that both of them shuddered. An abominable thought had flashed across their evil minds, and, without a word or look, they understood each other.

Louis broke the ominous silence by abruptly saying : "Then you refuse to disappear if I pay you a hundred and fifty thousand francs? Think it over before deciding : it is not too late yet."

"I have fully thought it over. I know you will not attempt to deceive me any more. Between certain case, and the probability of an immense fortune, I choose the latter at all risks. I will share your success or your failure ; we will swim or sink together."

"And you will follow my instructions?"

"Blindly."

Raoul must have been very certain of Louis's intentions, for he did not ask him a single question. Perhaps he dared not. Perhaps he preferred doubt to shocking certainty, as if he could thus escape the remorse attendant upon criminal complicity.

"In the first place," said Louis, "you must at once return to Paris."

"I will be there in forty-eight hours."

"You must be constantly at Madame Fauvel's, and keep me informed of everything that takes place in the family."

"I understand."

Louis laid his hand on Raoul's shoulder, as if to impress upon his mind what he was about to say. "You have a sure means of being restored to your mother's confidence and affection, by blaming me for everything that has happened to distress her. Abuse me constantly. The more odious you render me in her eyes and those of Madeleine, the better you will serve me. Nothing would please me more than to be denied admittance to the house when I return to Paris. You must say that you have quarrelled with me, and that if I still come to see you, it is because you cannot prevent it. That is the scheme : you can develop it."

Raoul listened to these strange instructions with astonishment. "What!" he cried; "you adore Madeleine, and take this means of winning her good graces? An odd way of carrying on a courtship, I must confess! I will be shot if I can comprehend."

"There is no necessity for your comprehending."

"All right," said Raoul, submissively. "If you say so."

Then Louis reflected that no one could properly execute a commission without having, at least, an idea of its nature. "Did you ever hear," he asked Raoul, "of the man who burned down his lady-love's house so as to have the bliss of carrying her out in his arms?"

"Yes; what of it?"

"At the proper time, I will charge you to set fire, morally, to Madame Fauvel's house; and I will rush in, and save her and her niece. Now, in the eyes of those women, my conduct will appear more magnanimous and noble in proportion to the contempt and abuse they have heaped upon me. I gain nothing by patient devotion; I have everything to hope from a sudden change of tactics. A well-managed stroke will transform a demon into an angel."

"Very well; a good idea!" said Raoul, approvingly, when his uncle had finished.

"Then you understand what is to be done?"

"Yes; but you will write to me?"

"Of course; and if anything should happen at Paris—"

"I will telegraph to you."

"And never lose sight of my rival, the cashier."

"Prosper? Not much danger of our being troubled by him, poor boy! He is just now my most devoted friend. Trouble has driven him into a path of life which will soon prove his destruction. Every now and then I pity him from the bottom of my soul."

"Pity him as much as you like."

The two men shook hands and separated, apparently the best friends in the world; in reality, the bitterest enemies. Raoul would not forgive Louis for having attempted to appropriate all the booty and leave him in the lurch, when it was he who had risked the greatest dangers. Louis, on his part, was alarmed at the attitude taken by Raoul. Thus far he had found him tractable, and even blindly obedient; and now he had suddenly become rebellious and threatening. Instead of ordering Raoul, he was forced to consult and bargain with him. What could be more wounding to his vanity and self-conceit than the reproaches, well founded though they were, to which he had been obliged to listen from a mere youth? As he walked back to his brother's house, thinking over what had just occurred, Louis swore that sooner or later he would be revenged, and that, as soon as he could, he would take means of getting rid of Raoul for ever. But for the present he was so afraid of his young accomplice that, according to

his promise, he wrote to him the next day, and every succeeding day, full particulars of everything that happened. Seeing how important it was to restore his shaken confidence, Louis entered into the most minute details of his plans. The situation remained the same: the dark cloud hung threateningly near, but grew no larger.

Gaston seemed to have forgotten that he had written to Beaucaire, and never mentioned Valentine's name once. Like all men accustomed to a busy life, Gaston was miserable except when occupied, and spent his whole time in the foundry, which seemed to absorb him entirely. It was losing money when he purchased it; but he determined to work it until it should be equally beneficial to himself and the neighbourhood. He engaged the services of an intelligent engineer, and, thanks to untiring energy and new improvements in machinery, his receipts soon more than equalled his expenses.

"Now that we are doing so well," said Gaston joyously, "we shall certainly make twenty-five thousand francs next year."

Next year! Alas, poor Gaston! Five days after Raoul's departure, one Saturday afternoon, Gaston was suddenly taken ill. He had a sort of vertigo, and was so dizzy that he was forced to lie down.

"I know what is the matter," he said. "I have often been ill in this way at Rio. A couple of hours' sleep will cure me. I will lie down, and you can send some one to awaken me when dinner is ready, Louis."

But when the servant came to announce dinner, he found Gaston much worse. He had a violent headache, a choking sensation in his throat, and dimness of vision. But his worst symptom was dysphonia; he would try to articulate one word, and find himself using another. His jaw-bones became so stiff, that it was with the greatest difficulty that he opened his mouth. Louis came up to his brother's room, and urged him to send for the physician. "No," said Gaston, "I won't have any doctor to make me ill with all sorts of medicines. I know what is the matter with me, and my indisposition will be cured by a simple remedy which I have always used." At the same time he ordered Manuel, his old Spanish servant, who had lived with him for ten years, to prepare him some lemonade.

The next day Gaston appeared to be much better. He ate his breakfast, and was about to take a walk, when the pains of the previous day suddenly returned in a more violent form. Without consulting his brother, Louis sent to Oloron for Dr. C——, whose wonderful cures had won him a wide reputation. The doctor declared that there was no danger, and merely prescribed a dose of valerian, and a blister with some grains of morphine sprinkled on it. But in the middle of the night, all the symptoms suddenly changed for the worse. The pain in the head was succeeded by a fearful oppression, and the sick man suffered torture in trying to get his breath. Daybreak found him still tossing restlessly from pillow to pillow. When Dr. C—— came early in the morning, he appeared very much surprised at this change for the worse. He inquired if they had not used too much morphine. Manuel said that he had put the blister on his master, and the doctor's directions had been accurately followed. The doctor, after having examined Gaston, and found his breathing heavy and irregular, prescribed leeches and a heavy dose of sulphate of quinine; he then retired, saying he would return the next day. As soon as the doctor had gone, Gaston sent for a friend of his, a lawyer, to come to him as soon as possible.

"For Heaven's sake! what do you want with a lawyer?" inquired Louis.

"I want his advice, brother. It is useless to try and deceive ourselves;

I know I am extremely ill. Only timid fools are superstitious about making their wills. I would rather have the lawyer at once, and then my mind will be at rest."

Gaston did not think he was about to die ; but, knowing the uncertainty of life, determined to be prepared for the worst. He had too often imperilled his life, and been face to face with death, to feel any fear now. He had made his will while ill at Bordeaux ; but now that he had found Louis, he wished to leave him all his property, and sent for his business man to advise as to the best means of disposing of his wealth for his benefit. The lawyer was a shrewd, wiry little man, very popular, and perfectly familiar with all the intricacies of the law. Nothing delighted him more than to succeed in eluding some stringent article of the Code ; and he often sacrificed large fees for the sake of outwitting his opponent, and controverting the justness of a decision. Once aware of his client's wishes and intentions, he had but one idea, and that was to carry them out as inexpensively as possible, by skilfully evading the heavy costs to be paid by the inheritor of the estate. He explained to Gaston that he could, by an act of partnership, associate Louis in his business enterprises, by signing an acknowledgment that half of the money invested in these various concerns belonged to and had been advanced by his brother ; so that, in the event of Gaston's death, Louis would only have to pay taxes on half the fortune. Gaston eagerly took advantage of this fiction ; not that he thought of the money saved by the transaction if he died, but this would be a favourable opportunity for sharing his riches with Louis without wounding his delicate sensibility. A deed of partnership between Gaston and Louis de Clameran, for the working of a cast-iron mill, was drawn up ; this deed acknowledged Louis to have invested five hundred thousand francs as his share of the capital.

When Louis was called in to sign the paper, he violently opposed his brother's project. "Why do you distress me by making these preparations for death, merely because you are suffering from a slight indisposition ? Do you think that I would consent to accept your wealth during your lifetime ? If you die, I am your heir ; if you live, I enjoy your property as if it were my own. What more can you wish ?"

Vain remonstrances. Gaston was not a man to be persuaded from accomplishing a purpose upon which he had fully set his heart. When, after mature deliberation, he made a resolution, he always carried it out in spite of all opposition. After a long and heroic resistance, which showed great nobleness of character and rare disinterestedness, Louis, urged by the physician, finally yielded, and signed his name to the papers drawn up by the lawyer. It was done. Now he was legally Gaston's partner, and possessor of half his fortune. No court of law could deprive him of what had been deeded with all the legal formalities, even if his brother should change his mind and try to get back his property. The strangest sensations now filled Louis's breast. He was in a state of delirious excitement, often felt by persons suddenly raised from poverty to affluence. Whether Gaston lived or died, Louis was the lawful possessor of an income of twenty-five thousand francs, without counting the eventual profits of the iron-works. At no time in his life had he hoped for or dreamed of such wealth. His wildest wishes were surpassed. What more could he want ? Alas ! he wanted the power of enjoying these riches in peace : they had come too late. This fortune, fallen from the skies, should have filled his heart with joy, whereas it only made him melancholy and angry. This unlooked-for

happiness seemed to have been sent by cruel fate as a punishment for his past sins. Although his conscience told him that he deserved this misery, he blamed Gaston entirely for his present torture. Yes, he held Gaston responsible for the horrible situation in which he found himself. His letters to Raoul for several days expressed all the fluctuations of his mind, and revealed glimpses of coming evil.

"I have twenty-five thousand francs a year," he wrote to him, a few hours after signing the deed of partnership; "and I possess in my own right five hundred thousand francs. One-fourth of this sum would have made me the happiest of men a year ago; now it is of no use to me. All the gold on earth could not remove one of the difficulties of our situation. Yes, you were right. I have been imprudent; but I pay dear for my precipitation. Rich or poor, I have cause to tremble as long as there is any risk of a meeting between Gaston and Valentine. How can they be kept apart? Will my brother renounce his plan of discovering the whereabouts of this woman whom he so loved?"

No; Gaston would never be turned from his search for his first love, as he proved by calling for her in the most beseeching tones when he was suffering his worst paroxysms of pain. He grew no better. In spite of the most careful nursing his symptoms changed, but showed no improvement. Each attack was more violent than the preceding one. Towards the end of the week, however, the pains left his head, and he felt well enough to get up and partake of a slight nourishment. But poor Gaston was a mere shadow of his former self. In one week he had aged ten years. His strong constitution was broken. He, who ten days ago was boasting of his vigorous health, was now weak and bent like an old man. He could hardly drag himself along, and shivered in the warm sun as if he were bloodless. Leaning on Louis's arm, he slowly walked down to look at the forge, and, seating himself before a furnace at full blast, he declared that he felt very much better, that this intense heat revived him. His pains were all gone, and he could breathe without difficulty.

His spirits rose, and he turned to the workmen gathered around, and said cheerfully: "I was not blest with a good constitution for nothing, my friends, and I shall soon be well again."

When the neighbours called to see him, and insisted that this illness was entirely owing to change of climate, Gaston replied that he supposed they were right, and that he ought to return to Rio as soon as he was well enough to travel. What hope this answer roused in Louis's breast! "Yes," he eagerly said, "I will go with you. A trip to Brazil would be charming!"

But the next day Gaston had changed his mind. He told Louis that he felt almost well, and was determined not to leave France. He proposed going to Paris to consult the best physicians, and then he would see Valentine. As his illness increased, he became more surprised and troubled at not hearing from Beaucaire. He wrote again in the most pressing terms, and asked for a reply by return of post. This letter was never received by Lafourcade. That night, Gaston's sufferings returned with renewed violence, and for the first time Dr. C— was uneasy. A fatal termination seemed possible. Gaston's pain left him in a measure, but he was growing weaker every moment. His heart beat slower, and his feet were as cold as ice. On the fourteenth day of his illness, after lying in a stupor for several hours, he revived sufficiently to ask for a priest, saying that he would follow the example of his ancestors, and die like a Christian. The priest

left him after half an hour's interview, and all the workmen were summoned to receive their master's farewell. Gaston spoke a few kind words to them all, saying that he had provided for them in his will. After they had gone, he made Louis promise to carry on the iron-works, embraced him for the last time, and sank back on his pillow in a dying state. As the bell tolled for noon he quietly breathed his last. Now Louis was in reality Marquis de Clameran, and a millionaire besides. Two weeks later, having made arrangements with the engineer in charge of the iron-works to attend to everything during his absence, he took his seat in the train for Paris. He had sent the following significant telegram to Raoul the night previous : "I arrive to-morrow."

XIX.

FAITHFUL to the programme laid down by his accomplice, while Louis watched at Oloron, Raoul remained in Paris with the purpose of recovering Madame Fauvel's confidence and affection, and of lulling any suspicions which might have arisen in her breast. The task was difficult, but not impossible. Madame Fauvel had been distressed by Raoul's wild extravagance, but had never ceased to love him. Whatever faults he had committed, whatever future follies he might indulge in, he would always remain her best loved child, her first born, the living image of her noble, handsome Gaston, the lover of her youth. She adored her two sons, Lucien and Abel; but she could not overcome an indulgent weakness for the unfortunate child, torn from her arms the day of his birth, abandoned to the mercies of hired strangers, and for twenty years deprived of home influences and a mother's love. She blamed herself for Raoul's misconduct, and accepted the responsibility of it, saying to herself, "It is my fault." Knowing these to be her sentiments, Raoul did not hesitate to take advantage of them. Never were more irresistible fascinations employed for the accomplishment of a wicked object. Beneath an air of innocent frankness, this precocious scoundrel concealed wonderful astuteness and penetration. He could at will adorn himself with the confiding artlessness of youth, so that angels might have yielded to the soft look of his large dark eyes. There were few women living who could have resisted the thrilling tones of his sympathetic voice. During the month of Louis's absence, Madame Fauvel was in a state of comparative happiness. Never had this mother and wife—this pure, innocent woman, in spite of her first and only fault—enjoyed such tranquillity. She felt as one under the influence of enchantment, while revelling in the sunshine of filial love, which almost bore the character of a lover's passion; for Raoul's devotion was ardent and constant, his manner so tender and winning, that any one would have taken him for Madame Fauvel's suitor. As she was still at her country house, and M. Fauvel went to town every morning, she had the whole of her time to devote to Raoul. When she had spent the morning with him at his house in Vésinet, she would often bring him home to dine and spend the evening with her. All his past faults were forgiven, or rather the whole blame of them was laid upon De Clameran; for, now that he was absent, had not Raoul once more become her noble, generous, and affectionate son? Raoul enjoyed the life he was leading, and took such an interest in the part that he was playing, that his acting was perfect. He possessed the faculty which makes cheats successful—faith in his own

impostures. Sometimes he would stop to think whether he was telling the truth, or acting a shameful comedy. His success was wonderful. Even Madeleine, the prudent, distrustful Madeleine, without being able to shake off her prejudice against the young adventurer, confessed that perhaps she had been influenced by appearances, and had judged unjustly. Raoul never asked for money now. He seemed to live on nothing.

Affairs were in this happy state when Louis arrived from Oloron. Although now immensely rich, he resolved to make no change in his style of living, but returned to his apartments at the Hotel du Louvre. His only outlay was the purchase of a handsome carriage; and this was driven by Manuel, who consented to enter his service, although Gaston had left him a sufficient sum to support him comfortably. Louis's dream, the height of his ambition, was to be ranked among the great manufacturers of France. He was prouder of being called "iron-founder" than of his marquise. During his adventurous life, he had met with so many titled gamblers and cut-throats, that he no longer believed in the prestige of nobility. It was impossible to distinguish the counterfeit from the genuine. He thought what was so easily imitated was not worth the having. Dearly bought experience had taught him that our unromantic century attaches no value to armorial bearings, unless their possessor is rich enough to display them upon a splendid coach. One can be a marquis without a marquise, but it is impossible to be a forge-master without owning a forge. Louis now thirsted for the homage of the world. All the badly digested humiliations of the past weighed upon him. He had suffered so much contempt and scorn from his fellow-men, that he burned to avenge himself. After a disgraceful youth, he longed to live a respected and honoured old age. His past career disturbed him little. He was sufficiently acquainted with the world to know that the sound of his carriage wheels would silence the jeers of those who knew his former life. These thoughts fermented in Louis's brain as he journeyed from Pau to Paris. He troubled his mind not in the least about Raoul, determining to use him as a tool so long as he needed his services, and then pay him a large sum if he would consent to leave him. All these plans and thoughts were afterwards found noted down in the diary which he had in his pocket at the time of the journey.

The first interview between the accomplices took place at the Hotel du Louvre. Raoul, having a practical turn of mind, said he thought that they ought both to be contented with the result already obtained, and that it would be folly to try and secure anything more. "What more do we want?" he asked his uncle. "We now possess over a million; let us divide it and keep quiet. We had better be satisfied with our good luck, and not tempt Providence."

But this moderation did not suit Louis. "I am rich," he replied, "but I desire more than wealth. I am determined to marry Madeleine: I swear she shall be my wife! In the first place, I madly love her; and then, as the nephew of the most eminent banker in Paris, I at once gain high position and public consideration."

"I tell you, uncle, your courtship will involve you in great risks."

"I don't care if it does. I choose to run them. My intention is to share my fortune with you; but I will not do so till the day after my wedding. Madeleine's dowry will be your share."

Raoul was silent. De Clameran held the money, and was therefore master of the situation. "You don't seem to anticipate any difficulty in carrying out your wishes," he resumed, discontentedly; "how are you to

account for your suddenly acquired fortune? M. Fauvel knows that a De Clameran lived at Oloron, and had money in his bank. You told him that you never heard of this person bearing your name, and then, at the end of a month, you come and say you have inherited his fortune."

"You are an innocent youth, nephew; your ingenuousness is amusing."

"Explain yourself."

"Certainly. The banker, his wife, and Madeleine must be informed that the De Clameran of Oloron was a natural son of my father, consequently my brother, born at Hamburg, and recognised during the emigration. Of course, he wished to leave his fortune to his own family. This is the story which you must tell Madame Fauvel to-morrow."

"That is a bold step to take."

"How so?"

"Inquiries might be made."

"Who would make them? The banker would not trouble himself to do so. What difference is it to him whether I had a brother or not? My title as heir is legally authenticated; and all he has to do is to pay the money he holds, and there his business ends."

"I am not afraid of his giving trouble."

"Do you think that Madame Fauvel and her niece will ask any questions? Why should they? They have no grounds for suspicion. Besides, they cannot take a step without compromising themselves. If they knew all our secrets, I would not have the least fear of their making revelations. They have sense enough to know that they had best keep quiet."

Not finding any other objections to make, Raoul said: "Very well, then, I will obey you; but I am not to call upon Madame Fauvel for any more money, am I?"

"And why not, pray?"

"Because, my uncle, you are rich now."

"Suppose I am rich," replied Louis triumphantly; "what does that matter? Have we not pretended to have quarrelled, and have you not abused me sufficiently to justify you in refusing my assistance? Ah! I foresaw everything, and when I explain my present plan, you will say with me, 'Success is certain.'" Louis de Clameran's scheme was very simple, and therefore, unfortunately, presented the strongest chances of success. "We will go back, and look at our balance-sheet. As heretofore, my brilliant nephew, you seem to have misunderstood my management of this affair, I will now explain it to you."

"I am listening."

"In the first place, I presented myself to Madame Fauvel, and said, not 'Your money or your life,' but 'Your money or your reputation!' It was a rude blow to strike, but effective. As I expected, she was frightened, and regarded me with the greatest aversion."

"Aversion is a mild term, uncle."

"I know that. Then I brought you upon the scene, and, without flattering you in the least, I must say that your opening act was a perfect success. I was concealed behind the curtain, and saw your first interview; it was sublime! She saw you, and loved you; you spoke a few words, and won her heart."

"And but for you—"

"Let me finish. This was the first act of our comedy. Let us pass to the second. Your extravagant follies—your grandfather would have said your dissoluteness—soon changed our respective situations. Madame

Fauvel, without ceasing to worship you—you resemble Gaston so closely—was frightened of you. She was so frightened that she was forced to come to me for assistance.”

“Poor woman !”

“I acted my part very well, as you must confess. I was grave, cold, indignant, and represented the distressed uncle to perfection. I spoke of the old probity of the De Clamerans, and bemoaned that the family honour should be dragged in the dust by a degenerate descendant. For a short time I triumphed at your expense. Madame Fauvel forgot her former prejudice against me, and soon showed that she esteemed and liked me.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Louis paid no attention to this ironical interruption. “Now we come to the third act,” he went on to say, “the time when Madame Fauvel, having Madeleine for an adviser, nearly judged us at our true value. Oh ! you need not flatter yourself that she did not fear and despise us both. If she did not hate you, Raoul, it was because a mother’s heart always forgives a sinful child. A mother can despise and worship her son at the same time.”

“She has proved it to me in so many touching ways, that I—yes, even I, hardened as I am—was moved, and felt remorse.”

“No doubt. I have felt some pangs myself. Where did I leave off? Oh, yes ! Madame Fauvel was frightened, and Madeleine, bent on sacrificing herself, had discarded Prosper, and consented to marry me, when Gaston’s existence was suddenly revealed to us. And what has happened since? You have succeeded in convincing Madame Fauvel that you are purer than an angel, and that I am blacker than hell. She is blinded by your noble qualities, and she and Madeleine regard me as your evil genius, whose pernicious influence led you astray.”

“You are right, my venerated uncle ; that is precisely the position you occupy.”

“Very good. Now we come to the fifth act, and our comedy needs entire change of scenery. We must veer around.”

“Change our tactics?”

“You think it difficult, I suppose? Nothing easier. Listen attentively, for the future depends upon your skilfulness.”

Raoul leaned back in his chair with folded arms, as if prepared for anything, and said : “I am ready.”

“The first thing for you to do,” said Louis, “is to go to Madame Fauvel to-morrow, and tell her the story about my natural brother. She will not believe you, but that makes no difference. The important thing is for you to appear convinced of the truth of what you tell her.”

“Consider me convinced.”

“Five days hence, I will call on M. Fauvel, and confirm the notification sent him by my notary at Oloron, that the money deposited in the bank now belongs to me. I will repeat, for his benefit, the story of the natural brother, and ask him to keep the money for me, as I have no occasion for it at present. You, who are so distrustful, my good nephew, may regard this deposit as a guarantee of my sincerity.”

“We will talk of that another time. Go on.”

“Then I will go to Madame Fauvel, and say, ‘Being very poor, my dear madame, necessity compelled me to claim your assistance in the support of my brother’s son, who is also yours. This youth is worthless and extravagant.’”

“Thanks, my good uncle.”

"He has poisoned your life when he should have added to your happiness; he is a constant anxiety and sorrow to your maternal heart. I have come to offer my regrets for your past trouble, and to assure you that you will have no annoyance in the future. I am now rich, and henceforth take the whole responsibility of Raoul upon myself."

"Is that what you call a scheme?"

"Wait, you will soon see whether it is. After listening to this speech, Madame Fauvel will feel inclined to throw herself in my arms, by way of expressing her gratitude and joy. She will refrain, however, on account of her niece. She will ask me to relinquish my claim on Madeleine's hand, now that I am rich. I will roundly tell her, 'No.' I will make this an opportunity for an edifying display of magnanimity and disinterestedness. I will say, 'Madame you have accused me of cupidity. I am now able to prove your injustice. I have been infatuated, as every man must be, by the beauty, grace, and intelligence of Mademoiselle Madeleine; and—I love her. If she were penniless, my devotion would only be the more ardent. She has been promised to me, and I must insist upon this one article of our agreement. This must be the price of my silence. And, to prove that I am not influenced by her fortune, I give you my sacred promise that the day after the wedding I will send Raoul sufficient to secure him an income of twenty-five thousand francs per annum.'"

Louis expressed himself with such convincing candour, that Raoul, an artist in knavery, was charmed and astonished. "Beautifully done," he cried, clapping his hands with glee. "That last sentence may create a chasm between Madame Fauvel and her niece. The promise of a fortune for me will most likely bring my mother over to our side."

"I hope so," said Louis with pretended modesty. "And I have strong reasons for hoping so, as I shall be able to furnish the good lady with excellent arguments for excusing herself in her own eyes. You know when some one proposes some little—what shall we call it?—transaction to an honest person, it must be accompanied by justifications sufficient to quiet all qualms of conscience. I shall prove to Madame Fauvel and her niece that Prosper has shamefully deceived them. I shall prove to them that he is cramped by debts, dissipated, and a reckless gambler, openly associating with a woman of no character."

"And very pretty, besides, by Jove! You must not neglect to expatiate upon the beauty and fascinations of the adorable Gipsy; that will be your strongest point."

"Don't be alarmed; I shall be more eloquent than a popular divine. Then I will explain to Madame Fauvel that if she really loves her niece, she will persuade her to marry, not an insignificant cashier, but a man of position, a great manufacturer, a marquis, and, more than this, one rich enough to establish you in the world."

Raoul was dazzled by this brilliant prospect. "If you don't decide her, you will at least make her waver," he said.

"Oh! I don't expect a sudden change. I only intend planting the germ in her mind; thanks to you, it will develop, flourish, and bear fruit."

"Thanks to me?"

"Allow me to finish. After making my speeches I shall disappear from the scene, and your rôle will commence. Of course your mother will repeat the conversation to you, and then we can judge of the effect produced. But remember, you must scorn to receive any assistance from me. You must swear that you will brave all privations, want, famine even, rather

than accept anything from a base man whom you hate and despise ; a man who— But you know exactly what you are to say. I can rely upon you for good acting."

"No one can surpass me when I am interested in my part. In pathetic rôles I am always a success, when I have had time to prepare myself."

"I know you are. But this disinterestedness need not prevent you from resuming your dissipations. You must gamble, bet, and lose more money than you ever did before. You must increase your demands, and say that you must have money at all costs. You need not account to me for any money you can extort from her. All you get is your own to spend as you please."

"You don't say so ! If you mean that—"

"You will expedite matters, I'll be bound."

"I can promise you, no time shall be wasted."

"Now listen to what you are to do, Raoul. Before the end of three months, you must have exhausted the resources of these two women. You must force from them every franc they can raise, so that they will be wholly unable to procure money to supply your increasing demands. In three months I must find them penniless, absolutely ruined, without even a jewel left."

Raoul was startled at the passionate, vindictive tone of Louis's voice as he uttered these last words. "You must hate these women, if you are so determined to make them miserable," he said.

"I hate them?" cried Louis. "Can't you see that I madly love Madeleine, love her as only a man of my age can love? Is not her image ever in my mind? Does not the very thought of her fire my heart, and her name burn my lips when I pronounce it?"

"Your great devotion does not prevent you planning the destruction of her present happiness."

"Necessity compels me to do so. Nothing but the most cruel deceptions and the bitterest suffering would ever induce her to become my wife. The day on which you have led Madame Fauvel and her niece to the extreme edge of the precipice, pointed out its dark depths, and convinced them that they are irretrievably lost, I shall appear, and rescue them. Why, it will be the crowning scene of our drama. I will play my part with such grandeur, such lofty magnanimity, that Madeleine will be touched. When she finds that it is her sweet self, and not her money, that I want, she will soften, and no longer despise me. No true woman can be indifferent to a grand passion. I don't pretend to say that she will love, but she will give herself to me without repugnance ; that is all I ask for."

Raoul was shocked at the cold-blooded perversity of his uncle ; but De Clameran showed his immense superiority in wickedness, and the apprentice admired the master. "You would certainly succeed, uncle," he said, "were it not for the cashier. Between you and Madeleine, Prosper will always stand ; if not in person, certainly in memory."

Louis smiled scornfully, and, throwing away his cigar which had gone out, said : "I don't mind Prosper, or attach any more importance to him than to that cigar."

"But she loves him."

"So much the worse for him. Six months hence, she will despise him ; he is already morally ruined, and at the proper time I will make an end of him socially. Do you know whither the road of dissipation leads, my good nephew? Prosper supports Gipsy, who is extravagant ; he gambles, keeps

fast horses, and gives suppers. Sooner or later he will have a night of bad luck ; the losses at baccarat must be paid within twenty-four hours, he will wish to pay, and he—has charge of the banker's safe."

Raoul protested against this insinuation.

"It is useless to tell me that he is honest. I daresay he is. I was honest myself until I learned to gamble. A scamp would have married Madeleine long ago, and sent us flying, bag and baggage. You say she loves him? No one but a coward would be defrauded of the woman he loved and who loved him. Ah, if I had once felt Madeleine's hand tremble in mine, if her rosy lips had once pressed a kiss upon my brow, the whole world could not take her from me. Woe to him who dares stand in my path? As it is, Prosper annoys me, and I intend to suppress him. With your aid I will so cover him with disgrace and infamy, that Madeleine will drive every thought of him from her mind."

Louis's tone of rage and vengeance startled Raoul, and made him regard the affair in a worse light than ever. "You have given me a shameful, dastardly rôle to play," he said after a long pause.

"My honourable nephew has scruples, I suppose," sneered De Clameran.

"Not exactly scruples ; yet I confess—"

"That you want to retreat? Rather too late to sing that tune, my friend. You wish to enjoy every luxury, have your pockets filled with gold, cut a fine figure in high society, and remain virtuous. You should have been born with a golden spoon in your mouth then. Fool! have you ever seen men like us draw millions from the pure fount of virtue. We must fish in muddy waters, and cleanse ourselves afterwards."

"I have never been rich enough to be honest," said Raoul humbly ; "but I must say it goes hard with me to torture two defenceless, frightened women, and ruin the character of a poor devil who regards me as his best friend. It is a low business!"

This resistance exasperated Louis to the last degree. "You are the most absurd, ridiculous fool I ever met," he cried. "An opportunity occurs for us to make an immense fortune. All we have to do is to stretch out our hands and take it ; when you must needs prove refractory, like a whimpering baby. Nobody but an ass would refuse to drink when he is thirsty, because he sees a little mud at the bottom of the bucket. I suppose you prefer theft on a small scale. And where will your system lead you? To the poor-house or the police-station. You prefer living from hand to mouth, supported by Madame Fauvel, having small sums doled out to you to pay your little gambling debts."

"I am neither ambitious nor cruel."

"And suppose Madame Fauvel dies to-morrow ; what will become of you? Will you go cringing up to the widower, and implore him to continue your allowance?"

"Enough said," cried Raoul, angrily interrupting his uncle. "I never had any idea of retreating. I made these objections to show you what infamous work you expect of me, and, at the same time, prove to you that without my assistance you can do nothing."

"I never pretended otherwise."

- "Then, my noble uncle, we might as well settle what my share is to be. Oh! it is not worth while for you to indulge in idle protestations. What will you give me in case of success? and what if we fail?"

"I told you before. I will give you twenty-five thousand francs a year, and all you can secure between now and my wedding-day."

"This arrangement suits me very well ; but where are your securities ?"

This question was discussed a long time, without being satisfactorily settled by the accomplices, who had every reason to distrust each other.

"What are you afraid of ?" asked De Clameran.

"Everything," replied Raoul. "Where am I to obtain justice, if you deceive me ? From this pretty little poniard ? No, thank you. I would be made to pay as dear for your hide, as for that of an honest man."

Finally, after a long debate and much recrimination, the matter was arranged, and they shook hands before separating. Alas ! Madame Fauvel and her niece soon felt the evil effects of the understanding between the villains. Everything happened as Louis had arranged. Once more, when Madame Fauvel had begun to breathe freely, and to hope that her troubles were over, Raoul's conduct suddenly changed ; he became more extravagant and dissipated than ever. Formerly, Madame Fauvel would have said, "I wonder what he does with all the money I give him ?" Now, she saw where it went. Raoul was reckless in his wickedness ; he was intimate with actresses, openly lavishing money and jewellery upon them ; he drove about with four horses, and bet heavily on every race. Never had he been so exacting and exorbitant in his demands for money ; Madame Fauvel had the greatest difficulty in supplying his wants. He no longer made excuses and apologies for spending so much ; instead of coaxingly entreating, he demanded money as a right, threatening to betray Madame Fauvel to her husband if she refused him. At this rate, all she and Madeleine possessed soon disappeared. In one month, all their money had been squandered. Then they were compelled to resort to the most shameful expedients in the household expenses. They economised in every possible way, making purchases on credit, and making tradesmen wait ; then they changed figures in the bills, and even invented accounts of things never bought. These imaginary costly whims increased so rapidly, that M. Fauvel one day said, with a smile, "You are becoming very coquettish, my dears." Poor women ! For months they had bought nothing, but had lived upon the remains of their former splendour, having all their old dresses altered, to keep up appearances in society. More clear-sighted than her aunt, Madeleine saw plainly that the day would soon come when everything would be discovered. Although she knew that the sacrifices of the present would avail nothing in the future, she was silent. A high-minded delicacy made her conceal her apprehensions beneath an assumed calmness. The fact of her sacrificing herself made her refrain from uttering anything like a complaint or censure. "As soon as Raoul sees we have nothing more to give," she would say to her aunt, "he will come to his senses, and stop all this extravagance." The day came, however, when Madame Fauvel and Madeleine found it impossible to give another franc. The previous evening, there had been a dinner-party, and they, with difficulty, scraped together enough money to defray the expenses. Raoul appeared, and said that he was in the greatest need of money, being forced to pay a debt of two thousand francs at once. In vain they implored him to wait a few days, until they could, with propriety, ask M. Fauvel for money.

"But I have no way of getting it for you," said Madame Fauvel, desperately ; "you have taken everything from me. I have nothing left but my diamonds : do you want them ? If they can be of use, take them."

Harden as the young villain was, he blushed at these words. He felt pity for this unfortunate woman, who had always been so kind and indulgent to him—who had so often lavished upon him her maternal caresses. He

felt for the noble girl, who was the innocent victim of a vile plot. But he was bound by his promise; he knew that a powerful hand would save these women at the brink of the precipice. More than this, he saw an immense fortune at the end of his road of crime, and quieted his conscience by saying that he would redeem his present cruelty by honest kindness in the future. Stifling his better impulses, he said harshly to Madame Fauvel: "Give me the jewels; I will take them to the pawnbroker's." She handed him a box containing a set of diamonds. It was a present from her husband the day he became worth a million. And so pressing was the want of these women who were surrounded by princely luxury, with their ten servants, beautiful horses, and jewels which were the admiration of Paris, that they implored him to bring them some of the money which he would procure on the diamonds. He promised, and kept his word. But they had revealed a new source—a mine to be worked; he took advantage of it. One by one, all Madame Fauvel's jewels followed the way of the diamonds; and, when hers were all gone, those belonging to Madeleine were given up. Madame Fauvel had no defence against the scoundrels who were torturing her, save prayers and tears; these availed her little. Sometimes, though, she betrayed such heartbroken suffering when Raoul begged her for money which she had no means of obtaining, that he would hurry away disgusted at his own brutal conduct, and say to De Clameran, "You must end this dirty business; I cannot stand it any longer. Let us steal with both hands as much as you like; but as to killing, by agony and fright, these two poor miserable women, whom I am really fond of, I am not going to do it."

De Clameran showed no surprise at these remonstrances. "It is not pleasant, I know," he replied; "but necessity knows no law. Have a little more perseverance and patience; we have almost got to the end."

The end was nearer than De Clameran supposed. Towards the latter part of November, Madame Fauvel saw that it was impossible to postpone the catastrophe any longer, and as a last effort determined to apply to the marquis for assistance. She had not seen him since his return from Oloron, except once, when he came to announce his accession to wealth. At that time, persuaded that he was Raoul's evil genius, she had received him very coldly, and did not invite him to repeat his visit. She hesitated before speaking to her niece of the step she intended taking, because she feared violent opposition. To her great surprise Madeleine warmly approved of it. Trouble had made her keen-sighted and suspicious. Reflecting on past events, comparing and weighing every act and speech of Raoul, she was now convinced that he was De Clameran's tool. She thought that Raoul was too shrewd to be acting in this shameful way, ruinously to his own interests, if there were not some secret motive at the bottom of it all. She saw that this persecution was more feigned than real. So thoroughly was she convinced of this, that, had it only concerned herself alone, she would have firmly resisted the oppression, confident that the threatened exposure would never take place. Recalling, with a shudder, certain looks of De Clameran, she guessed the truth, that the object of all this underhand work was to force her to become his wife. Determined on making the sacrifice, in spite of her repugnance towards the man, she wished to have the deed done at once; anything was preferable to the intolerable existence which Raoul made her lead. She felt that her courage might fail if she waited and suffered much longer.

"The sooner you see M. de Clameran the better for us, aunt," she said, after talking the project over.

The next day Madame Fauvel called on the marquis at the Hotel du Louvre, having sent him a note announcing her intended visit. He received her with cold, studied politeness, like a man who had been misunderstood and had been unjustly wounded. After listening to her report of Raoul's scandalous behaviour, he became very indignant, and swore that he would soon make him repent of his heartlessness. But, when Madame Fauvel told him that Raoul applied to her because he would take nothing from his uncle, De Clameran seemed confounded.

"The worthless rascal!" he exclaimed, "the idea of his audacity! Why, during the last four months, I have given him more than twenty thousand francs, which I would not have done except to prevent him from applying to you, as he constantly threatened to do."

Seeing an expression of doubt upon Madame Fauvel's face, Louis arose and took from a desk some receipts signed by Raoul, which he showed her. The total amount was twenty-three thousand five hundred francs. Madame Fauvel was shocked and amazed.

"He has obtained about forty thousand francs from me," she faintly said, "so that altogether he has spent at least sixty thousand francs in four months."

"I can't imagine what he does with it," said De Clameran, "unless he spends it on actresses."

"Good heavens! what can those creatures do with all the money lavished on them?"

"That is a thing one never knows."

"He appeared to pity Madame Fauvel sincerely; he promised that he would at once see Raoul, and make him alter his behaviour. Finally, after many protestations of friendship, he wound up by placing his fortune at her disposal. Although Madame Fauvel refused his offer, she appreciated the kindness of it, and on returning home said to Madeleine, "Perhaps we have mistaken his character; he may be a good man after all." Madeleine sadly shook her head. She had anticipated just what happened. De Clameran's magnanimity and generosity confirmed her presentiments.

Raoul called on his uncle, and found him radiant. "Everything is going on swimmingly, my smart nephew," said the marquis; "your receipts act like a charm. Ah, you are a partner worth having. I congratulate you upon your success. Forty thousand francs in four months!"

"Yes," said Raoul carelessly. "I got about that much from her and the pawnbrokers."

"Hang it! Then you must have a nice little sum laid by; for the young lady, I presume, is a myth."

"That is my business, uncle. Remember our agreement. I can tell you this much: Madame Fauvel and Madeleine have turned everything they can into money; they have nothing left, and I have had enough of my rôle."

"Your rôle is ended. I forbid you to hereafter ask for a single centime."

"What are you about to do? What has happened?"

"The mine is loaded, nephew, and I am only awaiting an opportunity to set fire to it."

Louis de Clameran relied upon making his rival, Prosper Bertomy, furnish him with this ardently desired opportunity. He loved Madeleine too

passionately to feel aught save the bitterest hate towards the man whom she had freely chosen, and who still possessed her heart. De Clameran knew that he could marry her at once if he chose; but in what way? By holding a sword of terror over her head, and forcing her to be his. He became frenzied at the idea of possessing her person, while her heart and soul would always be with Prosper. Thus he swore that, before marrying, he would so cover Prosper with shame and ignominy that no honest person would speak to him. He had first thought of killing him, but he preferred to disgrace him. He imagined that there would be no difficulty in ruining the unfortunate young man. He soon found himself mistaken. Though Prosper led a life of reckless dissipation, he preserved order in his disorder. If in a state of miserable entanglement, and obliged to resort to all sorts of make-shifts to escape his creditors, his caution prevented the world from knowing it. Vainly did Raoul, with his pockets full of gold, tempt him to play high; every effort to hasten his ruin failed. When he played he did not seem to care whether he lost or won; nothing aroused him from his cold indifference. His mistress, Nina Gipsy, was extravagant, but her devotion to Prosper restrained her from going beyond certain limits. Raoul's great intimacy with Prosper enabled him to fully understand the state of his mind; that he was trying to drown his disappointment in excitement, but had not given up all hope.

"You need not hope to beguile Prosper into committing any serious piece of folly," said Raoul to his uncle; "his head is as cool as an usurer's. What object he has in view I know not. Perhaps when he has spent his last coin he will blow his brains out; he certainly never will descend to any dishonourable act; he will never have recourse to the money in the banker's safe."

"We must urge him on," replied De Clameran; "lead him into more extravagances; make Gipsy call on him for costly finery, lend him plenty of money."

Raoul shook his head, as if convinced that his efforts would be vain. "You don't know Prosper, uncle: we can't galvanize a dead man. Madeleine killed him the day she discarded him. He takes no interest in anything on the face of the earth."

"We can wait."

They did wait; and, to the great surprise of Madame Fauvel, Raoul once more became an affectionate and dutiful son, as he had been during De Clameran's absence. From reckless extravagance he changed to great economy. Under pretext of saving money, he remained at Vésinet, although it was very uncomfortable and disagreeable there in the winter. He wished, he said to expiate his sins in solitude. The truth was, that, by remaining in the country, he insured his liberty, and escaped his mother's visits. It was about this time that Madame Fauvel, charmed with the improvement in Raoul, asked her husband to give him some employment in the bank. M. Fauvel was delighted to please his wife, and at once offered Raoul the place of corresponding clerk, with a salary of five hundred francs a month. The appointment pleased Raoul; but, in obedience to De Clameran's command, he refused it, saying, he had no taste for banking. This refusal so provoked the banker, that he rather bitterly reproached Raoul, and told him not to expect him to do anything to assist him in future. Raoul seized this pretext for ostensibly ceasing his visits. When he wanted to see his mother, he would come in the afternoon or evening, when he knew that M. Fauvel would be from home; and he only came often enough to keep

himself informed of what was going on in the household. This sudden lull after so many storms appeared ominous to Madeleine. She was more certain than ever that the plot was now ripe, and would suddenly burst upon them, without warning. She did not impart her presentiment to her aunt, but prepared herself for the worst.

"What can they be doing?" Madame Fauvel would say; "can they have decided not to persecute us any more?"

"Yes, what can they be doing?" Madeleine would murmur.

Louis and Raoul gave no signs of life, because, like expert hunters, they were silently hiding, and watching for a favourable opportunity of pouncing upon their victims. Never losing sight of Prosper for a day, Raoul had exhausted every effort of his fertile mind to compromise his honour—to ensnare him into some inextricable entanglement. But, as he had foreseen, the cashier's indifference offered little hope of success. De Clameran began to grow impatient at this delay, and had fully determined to bring matters to a crisis himself, when one night, about three o'clock, he was aroused by Raoul. He knew that some event of great importance must have happened, to make his nephew come to him at that hour of the night.

"What is the matter?" he anxiously inquired.

"Perhaps nothing; perhaps everything. I have just left Prosper."

"Well?"

"I had him, Madame Gipsy, and three other friends to dine with me. After dinner, I made up a game of baccarat, but Prosper took no interest in it, although he was quite tipsy."

"You must be drunk yourself, to come here waking me up in the middle of the night, to hear this idle gabble," said Louis, angrily.

"Now, wait until you hear the rest."

"Zounds! speak then!"

"After the game was over, we went to supper; Prosper became quite intoxicated, and betrayed the word with which he closes the money-safe."

At these words, De Clameran uttered a cry of triumph. "What was the word?"

"His mistress's name."

"Gipsy! Yes, that would be five letters." Louis was so excited that he jumped out of bed, slipped on his dressing-gown, and began to stride up and down the room. "Now we have got him!" he said, with vindictive satisfaction. "There's no chance of escape for him now! Ah! the virtuous cashier won't touch the money confided to him; so we must touch it for him. His disgrace will be just as great, no matter who opens the safe. We have the word; you know where the key is kept."

"Yes; when M. Fauvel goes out he always leaves the key in a drawer of his secretary, in his bedroom."

"Very good. You will go and get this key from Madame Fauvel. If she does not give it up willingly, use force; then, when having got the key, you will open the safe, and take out every franc it contains. Ah! Master Bertomy, you shall pay dear for being loved by the woman I love!"

For five minutes, De Clameran indulged in such a tirade of abuse against Prosper, mingled with rhapsodies of love for Madeleine, that Raoul thought him almost out of his mind, and tried to calm him. "Before crying victory," he said, "you had better consider the drawbacks and difficulties. Prosper might change the word to-morrow."

"Yes, he might; but it is not probable he will. He will forget what he said while drunk; besides, we will be quiet."

"That is not all. M. Fauvel has given orders that no large sum shall be kept in the safe over night; before closing time, everything is sent to the Bank of France."

"A large sum will be kept there the night I choose."

"You think so?"

"I think this: I have a hundred thousand crowns deposited with M. Fauvel; and if I desire the money to be paid over to me early some morning, directly the bank is opened, of course the money will be kept in the safe the previous night."

"A splendid idea!" cried Raoul, admiringly.

It was a good idea; and the plotters spent several hours in studying its strong and weak points. Raoul feared that he would never be able to overcome Madame Fauvel's resistance; and, even if she yielded the key, would she not go directly and confess everything to her husband, rather than sacrifice an innocent man? But Louis felt no uneasiness on this score.

"One sacrifice necessitates another," he said: "she has made too many to draw back at the last one. She sacrificed her adopted daughter; therefore she will sacrifice a young man, who is, after all, a comparative stranger to her."

"But Madeleine will never believe any harm of Prosper; therefore —"

"You talk like an idiot, my verdant nephew!"

Before the conversation had ended, the plan seemed feasible. The scoundrels made all their arrangements, and fixed the day for committing the crime. They selected the evening of the 27th of February, because Raoul knew that M. Fauvel would be dining out, and Madeleine was invited to a party on that evening. Unless something unforeseen should occur, Raoul knew that he would find Madame Fauvel alone at half-past eight o'clock.

"I will ask M. Fauvel this very day," said De Clameran, "to have my money ready for Tuesday."

"That is a very short notice, uncle," objected Raoul. "You know there are certain forms to be gone through, and he can claim a longer time wherein to pay it over."

"That is true, but our banker is proud of always being prepared to pay any amount of money, no matter how large; and if I say I am pressed, and would like to be accommodated on Tuesday, he will make a point of having it ready for me. Then, you must ask Prosper, as a personal favour to you, to have the money on hand at the opening of the bank."

Raoul once more examined the situation, to discover if there was not the grain of sand which so often becomes a mountain at the last moment. "Prosper and Gipsy are to be with me at Vésinet this evening," he said; "but I cannot ask him anything until I know the banker's answer. As soon as you have arranged matters with him, send me word by Manuel."

"I can't send Manuel, for an excellent reason—he has left me; but I can send another messenger."

What Louis said was true; Manuel was gone. He had insisted on keeping Gaston's old servant in his service, because he thought it imprudent to leave him at Oloron, where his gossiping might cause trouble. He soon became annoyed by Manuel's loyalty, and determined to rid himself of him; so he just gave him the idea of ending his days in peace

in his own country. So, the evening before, Manuel had started for Arenys-de-Mar, a little port of Catalonia, his native place ; and Louis was seeking another servant. After breakfasting together, Louis and Raoul separated. De Clameran was so elated by the prospect of success, that he lost sight of the great crime intervening. Raoul was calm, but resolute. The shameful deed he was about to commit would give him riches, and release him from a hateful servitude. His one thought was liberty, as Louis's was Madeleine. Everything seemed to progress finely. The banker did not ask for the delay he was entitled to, but promised to pay the money on the day named. Prosper said he would have it ready early in the morning. The certainty of success made Louis almost wild with joy. He counted the hours and the minutes.

"When this affair is ended," he said to Raoul, "I will reform, and be a model of virtue. No one will dare hint that I have ever indulged in any sins—great or small."

But Raoul became more and more sad as the time approached. Reflection gradually showed him the blackness of the contemplated crime. Raoul was bold and determined in the pursuit of his own gratifications and wickedness ; he could smile in the face of his best friend, while cheating him of his last napoleon at cards ; and he could sleep well after stabbing his enemy to the heart ; but he was young. He was young in sin. Vice had not yet penetrated to his marrow-bones—corruption had not yet crowded into his soul enough to uproot and destroy every generous sentiment. It had not been so very long since he had cherished a few holy beliefs. The good intentions of his boyhood were not quite obliterated from his sometimes reproachful memory. Possessing the daring courage natural to youth, he despised the cowardly part forced upon him ; this dark plot—this slow agony of two helpless women, filled him with horror and disgust. His heart revolted at the idea of acting the part of Judas towards his mother, to betray her between two kisses. Disgusted by Louis's cool villany, he longed for some great peril to be braved, so as to excuse himself in his own eyes. But no ; he well knew that he ran no risk, not even that of being arrested and sent to prison. For he was certain that, if M. Fauvel discovered everything, he would do his utmost to hush up every fact connected with the disgraceful story. Although he was careful not to breathe it to De Clameran, he felt a sincere affection for Madame Fauvel, and was touched by the indulgent fondness which she so unchangingly lavished upon him. He had been happy at Vésinet ; while his accomplice, or rather his master, was at Oloron. He would have been glad to lead an honest life, and could not see the sense of committing a crime when there was no necessity for it. He hated De Clameran, who abused his power for the sake of gratifying a selfish passion ; and he longed for an opportunity of thwarting his plots, if it could be done without also ruining himself. His resolution, which had been so firm in the beginning, was growing weaker and weaker as the hours rolled on ; as the crisis approached, his horror of the deed increased. And yet Louis never left him, but continually painted for him a dazzling future, position, wealth, and freedom. He prepared, and forced his accomplice to rehearse, the scene which was to be enacted at Madame Fauvel's, with as much coolness and precision as if it were to be performed at a public theatre. Louis said that no piece could be well acted unless the actor was interested, and imbued with the spirit of his rôle. But the more urgently Louis pressed upon him the advantages to be derived from success—the oftener he sounded in his ears the magic words "five hundred

thousand francs," the more loudly did Raoul's conscience cry out against the sinful deed. On the Monday evening, about six o'clock, Raoul felt so depressed and miserable that he asked himself whether, even if he wished it, he would be able to obey.

"Are you afraid?" asked De Clameran, who had anxiously watched these inward struggles.

"Yes," replied Raoul, "yes; I have not your ferocious will, and I am afraid!"

"What, you, my pupil, my friend! It is not possible. Come, a little energy, one more stroke of our oars and we are in port. You are only nervous; come to dinner, and a bottle of Burgundy will soon set you right."

They were walking along the boulevards. De Clameran insisted upon their entering a restaurant, and having dinner in a private room. Vainly did he strive, however, to chase the gloom from his companion's pale face. Raoul sat listening, with a sullen frown, to his friend's jest about "swallowing the bitter pill gracefully." Urged by Louis, he drank two bottles of wine, in hopes that intoxication would inspire him with courage to do the deed. But the drunkenness he sought came not; the wine proved false; at the bottom of the last bottle he found nothing but anger and disgust. The clock struck eight.

"The time has come," said Louis firmly.

Raoul turned livid; his teeth chattered, and his limbs trembled so that he was unable to stand on his feet. "Oh, I cannot do it!" he cried in an agony of terror and rage.

De Clameran's eyes flashed angrily at the prospect of all his plans being ruined at the last moment. But he dared not give way to his anger, for fear of exasperating Raoul, whom he knew to be anxious for an excuse to quarrel; so he violently pulled the bell-rope. A waiter appeared. "A bottle of port," he said, "and a bottle of ruin."

When the waiter returned with the bottles, Louis filled a large glass with the two liquors mixed, and handed it to Raoul. "Drink this!" he said.

Raoul emptied the glass at a draught, and a faint colour returned to his pale cheek. He arose, and striking the table with his fist, cried fiercely, "Come along!"

But before he had walked thirty yards, the fictitious energy inspired by drink deserted him. He clung to De Clameran's arm, and was almost dragged along, trembling like a criminal on his way to the scaffold.

"If I can once get him in the house," thought Louis, who had studied Raoul and understood him; "once inside, his rôle will sustain him and carry him through, and all will be well. The cowardly baby! I would like to wring his neck!"

As they walked along he said: "Now, don't forget our arrangements, and be careful how you enter the house; everything depends upon that. Have you the pistol in your pocket?"

"Yes, yes! Let me alone!"

It was well that De Clameran accompanied Raoul; for, when he got in sight of the door his courage gave way, and he longed to retreat. "A poor, helpless woman!" he groaned, "and an honest man who pressed my hand in friendship yesterday, to be cowardly ruined, betrayed by me! Ah, it is too base, too cowardly!"

"Come," said De Clameran in a tone of contempt, "I thought you had

more nerve. When a fellow has no more pluck than that, he should remain honest?"

Raoul overcame his weakness, and, silencing the clamours of his conscience, hurried to the house and pulled the bell. "Is Madame Fauvel at home?" he enquired of the servant who opened the door.

"Madame is alone in the little drawing-room," was the reply.

And Raoul went up stairs.

XX.

DE CLAMERAN's injunction to Raoul was: "Be very cautious how you enter the room; your appearance must tell everything, and thus avoid impossible explanations."

The recommendation was useless. The instant that Raoul entered the room, the sight of his pale, haggard face and wild eyes made Madame Fauvel exclaim: "Raoul! What misfortune has happened to you?"

The sound of her tender, affectionate voice acted like an electric shock upon the young bandit. He shook like a leaf. But at the same time his mind seemed to change. Louis was not mistaken in his estimate of his companion's character. Raoul was on the stage, his part was to be played; his assurance returned to him; his cheating, lying nature assumed the ascendant. "This misfortune is the last I shall ever suffer, mother!"

Madame Fauvel rushed towards him, and, seizing his hand, gazed searchingly into his eyes, as if to read his very soul. "What is the matter? Raoul, my dear son, do tell me what troubles you."

He gently pushed her from him. "The matter is, my mother," he said, in a voice of heart-broken despair, "that I am unworthy of you, unworthy of my noble father!"

She shook her head as though to protest.

"Alas!" he said, "I know and judge myself. No one can reproach me for my infamous conduct more bitterly than does my own conscience. I am not naturally wicked, but only a miserable fool. At times I am like an insane man, and am not responsible for my actions. Ah, my dear mother, I would not be what I am, if you had watched over my childhood. But brought up among strangers, with no guide but my own evil passions, nothing to restrain me, no one to advise me, no one to love me, owing nothing, not even my stolen name, I am cursed with vanity and unbounded ambition. Poor, with no one to assist me but you, I have the tastes and vices of a millionaire's son. Alas! when I found you, the evil was done. Your affection, your maternal love, the only true happiness of my life, could not save me. I, who had suffered so much, endured so many privations, even the pangs of hunger, became spoiled by this new life of luxury and pleasure which you opened before me. I rushed headlong into extravagance, as a drunkard long deprived of drink seizes and drains to the dregs the first bottle in his reach."

Madame Fauvel listened, silent and terrified, to these words of despair and remorse, which Raoul uttered with remarkable vehemence. She dared not interrupt him, but felt certain some dreadful piece of news was coming. Raoul continued in a sad hopeless tone: "Yes; I have been a weak fool. Happiness was within my reach, and I had not the sense to stretch forth my hand and grasp it. I rejected a delicious reality to eagerly pursue a

vain phantom. I, who ought to have spent my life at your feet, and daily striven to express my gratitude for your lavish kindness, have made you unhappy, destroyed your peace of mind, and, instead of being a blessing, I have been a curse ever since the first fatal day you welcomed me to your kind heart. Ah, unfeeling brute that I was, to squander upon creatures whom I despised, a fortune, of which each gold piece must have cost you a tear! Too late, too late! I find that with you was happiness."

He stopped, as if overcome by the consciousness of his evil deeds, and seemed about to burst into tears.

"It is never too late to repent, my son," murmured Madame Fauvel in comforting tones.

"Ah, if I only could!" cried Raoul; "but no, it is too late! Besides, can I tell how long my good resolutions will last? This is not the first time that I have condemned myself pitilessly. Stinging remorse for each new fault made me swear to lead a better life, to sin no more. What was the result of these periodical repentances? At the first temptation I forgot my remorse and good resolutions. I am weak and mean-spirited, and you are not firm enough to govern my vacillating nature. While my intentions are good, my actions are villanous. The disproportion between my extravagant desires, and the means of gratifying them, is too great for me to endure any longer. Who knows to what fearful lengths my unfortunate disposition may lead me? However, I shall know how to do myself justice?" he finally said with a reckless laugh.

Madame Fauvel was too cruelly agitated to follow Raoul's skilful transitions. "Speak!" she cried, "explain yourself; am I not your mother? Tell me the truth; I am ready to hear the worst."

He appeared to hesitate, as if afraid to crush his mother's heart by the terrible blow he was about to inflict. Then in a voice of gloomy despair he replied: "I am ruined!"

"Ruined!"

"Yes, ruined; and I have nothing more to expect or hope for. I am dishonoured, and all through my own fault; no one is to blame but myself."

"Raoul!"

"It is the sad truth, my poor mother; but fear nothing. I shall not trail in the dust the name which you bestowed upon me. I will at least have the courage not to survive my dishonour. Come, mother, don't pity me, or distress yourself; I am one of those miserable beings fated to find no peace save in the arms of death. I came into the world with misfortune stamped upon my brow. Was not my birth a shame and disgrace to you? Did not the memory of my existence haunt you day and night, filling your soul with remorse? And now, when I am restored to you after many years' separation, do I not prove to be a bitter curse instead of a blessing?"

"Ungrateful boy! Have I ever reproached you?"

"Never! Your poor Raoul will die blessing you, and with your beloved name upon his lips."

"Die? You die, my son?"

"It must be, my dear mother; honour compels it. I am condemned by judges from whose decision no appeal can be taken—my conscience and my

An hour ago, Madame Fauvel would have sworn that Raoul had made her suffer all the torments that a woman could endure; but now she felt

that all her former troubles were nothing compared with her present agony.

"What, then, have you been doing, Raoul?" she gasped.

"Money was entrusted to me; I gambled, and lost it."

"Was it a very large sum?"

"No; but more than you can replace. My poor mother, have I not taken everything from you? Have you not given me your last jewel?"

"But M. de Clameran is rich. He placed his fortune at my disposal. I will order the carriage, and go to him."

"But M. de Clameran is away, and the money must be paid this evening, or I am lost. Alas! I have thought it all over, and, although it is hard to die so young, still fate wills it so." He pulled the pistol from his pocket, and, with a forced smile, added: "This will settle everything."

Madame Fauvel was too upset and frightened to reflect upon the horror of Raoul's behaviour; and that these wild threats were a last expedient. Forgetful of the past, careless of the future, her every thought concentrated upon the present, she comprehended but one fact: that her son was about to commit suicide, and that she was powerless to prevent the fearful deed. "Oh, wait a little while, my son!" she cried. "André will soon return home, and I will ask him to give me— How much did you lose?"

"Thirty thousand francs."

"You shall have them to-morrow."

"But I must have the money to-night."

Madame Fauvel wrung her hands in despair. "Oh! why did you not come to me sooner, my son? Why did you not have confidence enough in me to come at once for help? This evening there is no one in the cashier's office to open the safe, otherwise—"

"The safe!" cried Raoul, "but you know where the key is kept?"

"Yes, it is in the next room."

"Well!" he exclaimed, with a bold look that caused Madame Fauvel to lower her eyes, and keep silent. "Give me the key, mother," he said in a tone of entreaty.

"O Raoul, Raoul!"

"It is my life I am asking of you."

These words decided her; she snatched up a candle, rushed into her bedroom, opened the secretary, and took out M. Fauvel's key. But, when about to hand it to Raoul, her reason returned to her. "No," she stammered, "no, it is impossible."

He did not insist, and seemed about to leave the room. "True," said he; "then, mother, a last kiss."

"What could you do with the key, Raoul?" asked Madame Fauvel, stopping him. "You do not know the secret word."

"No; but I can try to open it."

"You know that money is never kept in the safe over night."

"Nevertheless, I can make the attempt. If I open the safe and find money in it, it will be a miracle, showing that Heaven has pitied my misfortunes."

"And, if you are not successful, will you promise me to wait until to-morrow?"

"I swear it, by my father's memory."

"Then take the key, and follow me."

Pale and trembling, Raoul and Madame Fauvel passed through the banker's study, and down the narrow staircase leading to the offices and cashier's room below. Raoul walked in front, holding the light, and the

key of the safe. Madame Fauvel was convinced that it would be utterly impossible to open the safe, as the key was useless without the secret word, and of course Raoul could not know what that was. Even granting that some chance had revealed the secret to him, he would find but little in the safe, since everything was deposited in the Bank of France. The only anxiety she felt was, how Raoul would bear the disappointment, how she could calm his despair. She thought that she would gain time by letting Raoul make the attempt; and then, when he found he could not open the safe, he would keep his promise, and wait until the next day. "When he sees there is no chance of success," she thought, "he will wait as he promised; and then to-morrow—to-morrow—"

What she would do on the morrow she knew not, she did not even ask herself. But in extreme situations the least delay inspires hope, as if a short respite meant sure salvation. The condemned man, at the last moment, begs for a reprieve of a day, an hour, a few seconds. Raoul was about to kill himself; his mother prayed to God to grant her one night; as if in this short space of time some unexpected relief would come to end her misery. They reached Prosper's office, and Raoul placed the lamp on a high stool so that it lighted the whole room. He had then recovered all his coolness, or rather that mechanical precision of movement, almost independent of will, which men accustomed to peril always find ready in time of need. Rapidly, with the dexterity of experience, he slipped the buttons on the five letters composing the name of G, i, p, s, y. His features, during this short operation, expressed the most intense anxiety. He was fearful that the awful energy he had shown might after all be of no use; perhaps the safe would remain closed, perhaps the money would not be there. Prosper might have changed the word, or neglected to have the money in the safe. Madame Fauvel saw these visible apprehensions with alarm. She read in his eyes that wild hope of a man who, passionately desiring an object, ends by persuading himself that his own will suffices to overcome all obstacles. Having often been present when Prosper was preparing to leave his office, Raoul had fifty times seen him move the buttons, and lock the safe, just before the bank closed. Indeed, having a practical turn of mind, and an eye to the future, he had even turned the key in the lock on more than one occasion. He inserted the key softly, and turned it round once, pushed it farther in, and turned it a second time; then thrust it right in with a jerk, and turned it again. His heart beat so loudly that Madame Fauvel could hear its throbs. The word had not been changed; the safe opened. Raoul and his mother simultaneously uttered a cry—she of terror, he of triumph.

"Shut it again!" exclaimed Madame Fauvel, frightened at the incomprehensible result of Raoul's attempt; "leave it alone, come away."

And, half frenzied, she clung to his arm, and pulled him away so abruptly, that the key was dragged from the lock, and, slipping along the glossy varnish of the safe-door, made a deep, long scratch. But at a glance the young man had perceived three rolls of bank notes on an upper shelf. He snatched them up with his left hand, and slipped them inside his vest. Exhausted by the effort she had just made, Madame Fauvel dropped his arm, and, almost fainting with emotion, leant against the back of a chair.

"Have mercy, Raoul!" she moaned. "I implore you to put back that money, and I solemnly swear that I will give you twice as much to-morrow. O my son, have pity upon your unhappy mother!"

He paid no attention to these words of entreaty, but carefully examined

the scratch on the safe. This trace of the robbery was very visible, and alarmed him.

"At least you will not take all," said Madame Fauvel; "just keep enough to save yourself, and put back the rest."

"What good would that do? What I take will be missed just the same."

"Oh, no! not at all. I can account to André; I will tell him I had a pressing need for some money, and opened the safe to get it."

In the meantime Raoul had carefully closed the safe. "Come, mother, let us go back to the sitting-room. A servant might go there to look for you, and be astonished at our absence."

Raoul's cruel indifference and cold calculations at such a moment filled Madame Fauvel with indignation. She thought that she had still some influence over her son—that her prayers and tears would have some effect upon his hard heart. "Let them be astonished," she cried; "let them come here and find us. Then there will be an end to all this. André will drive me from his house like a worthless creature, but I will not sacrifice the innocent. Prosper will be accused of this to-morrow. De Clameran has taken from him the woman he loved, and now you would deprive him of his honour! I will not allow it."

She spoke so loud and angrily that Raoul was alarmed. He knew that one of the office-men passed the night in a room close by, and although it was still early in the evening he might already be in bed, and listening to them. "Come upstairs," he said, seizing Madame Fauvel's arm.

But she clung to a table, and refused to move a step. "I have been cowardly enough to sacrifice Madeleine," she said, "but I will not ruin Prosper."

Raoul had an argument in reserve which he knew would make Madame Fauvel submit to his will. "Now, really," he said, with a cynical laugh, "do you pretend that you do not know Prosper and I arranged this little affair together, and that he is waiting to share the booty?"

"It is impossible!"

"What! Do you suppose, then, that chance alone told me the word, and placed the money in the safe?"

"Prosper is honest."

"Of course he is, and so am I too. The only thing is, that we both need money."

"You lie."

"No, dear mother. Madeleine dismissed Prosper, and the poor fellow has to console himself for her cruelty; and this sort of consolation is expensive."

He took up the lamp, and gently but firmly led Madame Fauvel towards the staircase. She mechanically suffered him to do so, more bewildered by what she had just heard, than she was at the opening of the safe-door. "What!" she gasped; "can Prosper be a thief?" She began to think herself the victim of a terrible nightmare, and that, when she awoke, her mind would be relieved of this intolerable torture. She helplessly clung to Raoul's arm as he assisted her up the little narrow staircase.

"You must put the key back in the secretary," said Raoul, as soon as they were in the bedroom again.

But she did not seem to hear him; so he went and put it in the place from which he had seen her take it. He then led, or rather carried, Madame Fauvel, into the little sitting-room, and placed her in an easy-chair. The

set, expressionless look of the wretched woman's eyes, and her dazed manner, frightened Raoul, who thought that she was going out of her mind.

"Come, cheer up, my dear mother," he said, in coaxing tones, as he rubbed her icy cold hands; "you have just saved my life, and have at the same time rendered an immense service to Prosper. Don't be alarmed; everything will come out right in the end. Prosper will be accused—perhaps arrested; he expects that, and is prepared for it; he will deny his culpability; and, as there is no proof against him, he will soon be set at liberty."

But these falsehoods were wasted on Madame Fauvel, who was incapable of understanding anything said to her. "Raoul," she moaned, "Raoul, my son, you have killed me."

Her gentle voice, kind even in its despairing accents, touched the very bottom of Raoul's perverted heart, and once more his soul was so wrung by remorse, that he felt inclined to put back the stolen money. The thought of De Clameran restrained him. Finding that Madame Fauvel still sat motionless and death-like in her chair, and fearing that M. Fauvel or Madeleine might enter at any moment, and demand an explanation, he hastily pressed a kiss upon his mother's brow, and hurried from the house. At the restaurant, in the room where they had dined, De Clameran, tortured by anxiety, awaited his accomplice. He wondered if, at the last moment, when he was not near to sustain him, Raoul would prove a coward and retreat. The merest accident, too, is sufficient to upset the most skilful combinations. When Raoul returned he jumped to his feet, ghastly pale, and with difficulty gasped out: "Well?"

"It is done, uncle, thanks to you; and I am now the greatest villain on the face of the earth." He unbuttoned his vest, and, pulling out the four bundles of bank-notes, angrily dashed them upon the table, adding, in a tone of hate and contempt: "Now I hope you are satisfied. This is the price of the happiness, honour, and perhaps the life, of three persons."

De Clameran paid no attention to these angry words. With feverish eagerness he seized the notes, and held them in his hand as if to convince himself of the reality of success. "Now Madeleine is mine," he cried, excitedly.

Raoul said nothing. This exhibition of joy, after the scene in which he had just been an actor, disgusted and humiliated him. Louis misinterpreted his silence, and asked, gaily: "Did you have much difficulty?"

"I forbid you ever to allude to this evening's work," cried Raoul, fiercely. "Do you hear me? I wish to forget it."

De Clameran shrugged his shoulders at this outburst of anger, and said, in a bantering tone: "Just as you please, my handsome nephew; forget it if you like. I rather think, though, you will not refuse to accept these three hundred and fifty thousand francs, as a slight memento. Take them—they are yours."

This generosity seemed neither to surprise nor satisfy Raoul. "According to our agreement," he said, sullenly, "I was to have much more than this."

"Of course; this is only on account."

"And when am I to have the rest, if you please?"

"The day I marry Madeleine, and not before, my boy. You are too valuable an assistant to lose at present; and you know that, though I don't distrust you, I am not altogether sure of your sincere affection for me."

Raoul reflected that to commit a crime, and not profit by it, would be the

height of absurdity. He had returned with the intension of breaking off all connection with De Clameran; but he now determined that he would not abandon his accomplice until there was nothing more to get out of him. "Very well," he said, "I accept this on account; but remember, I will never do another piece of work like this of to-night."

De Clameran burst into a loud laugh, and replied: "That is sensible; now that you are rich, you can afford to be honest. Set your conscience at rest, for I promise you I will require nothing more of you save a few trifling services. You can retire behind the scenes now, while I appear upon the stage."

XXI.

FOR more than an hour after Raoul's departure, Madame Fauvel remained in a state of torpor bordering upon unconsciousness. Gradually, however, she recovered her senses sufficiently to comprehend the horrors of her present situation; and, with the faculty of thought, that of suffering returned. The dreadful scene in which she had taken part was still before her affrighted vision; all the attending circumstances, unnoticed at the time, now struck her forcibly. She saw that she had been the dupe of a shameful conspiracy; that Raoul had tortured her with cold-blooded cruelty, had taken advantage of her tenderness, and played with her sufferings. But had Prosper anything to do with the robbery? This Madame Fauvel had no way of finding out. Ah, Raoul knew how the blow would strike when he accused his friend. He knew that she would end by believing in the cashier's complicity. Knowing that Madeleine's lover was leading a life of extravagance and dissipation, she thought it very likely he had, from sheer desperation, resorted to this bold step to pay his debts; her blind affection, moreover, made her anxious to attribute the first idea of crime to any one, rather than to her son. She had heard that Prosper was supporting one of those worthless creatures whose extravagance impoverishes men, and whose evil influence perverts their natures. When a young man is thus degraded, will he stop at any sin or crime? Alas! Madame Fauvel knew, from her own sad experience, to what depths even one fault can lead. Although she believed Prosper guilty, she did not blame him, but considered herself responsible for his sins. Was she not the cause that he no longer frequented the home he had begun to look upon as his own? Had she not destroyed his hopes of happiness, and driven him into a life of dissipation, wherein perhaps he sought forgetfulness? She was undecided whether to confide in Madeleine, or bury the secret in her own breast. Fatally inspired, she decided to keep silent.

When the young girl returned home at eleven o'clock, Madame Fauvel not only was silent as to what had occurred, but even succeeded in so concealing all traces of her agitation, that she escaped any questions from her niece. Her calmness never left her when M. Fauvel and Lucien returned, although she was in terror lest her husband should go down to the cashier's room to examine the books. It was not his habit to open the safe at night, but he sometimes did so. As fate would have it, the banker, as soon as he entered the room, began to speak of Prosper, saying how distressing it was that so interesting a young man should be thus throwing himself away, and wondering what could have happened to make him suddenly cease his visits at the house, and resort to bad company. If M. Fauvel had looked at the faces of his wife and niece while he harshly blamed the cashier, he would

have been puzzled at their strange expressions. All night long, Madame Fauvel suffered the most intolerable agony.

"In six hours," she would say to herself, "in three hours, in one hour, all will be discovered ; and then what will happen !"

When daybreak came, she heard the servants moving about the house. Then the offices were opened, and the noise made by the arriving clerks reached her. She attempted to get up, but felt so ill and weak that she sank back on her pillow ; and lying there, trembling like a leaf, bathed in cold perspiration, she awaited the discovery of the robbery. She was leaning over the side of the bed, straining her ear to catch the least sound, when Madeleine, who had shortly before left her, rushed back into the room. The poor girl's white face and wild eyes told Madame Fauvel that the crime was discovered.

"Do you know what has happened, aunt ?" cried Madeleine, in a shrill, horrified tone. "Prosper is accused of robbery, and the commissary of police has come to take him to prison !"

A groan was Madame Fauvel's only answer.

"Raoul or the marquis is at the bottom of this," continued Madeleine, excitedly.

"How can they be concerned in it ?"

"I can't tell yet ; but I only know that Prosper is innocent. I have just seen him, spoken to him. He would never have looked me in the face had he been guilty."

Madame Fauvel opened her lips to confess all : fear kept her silent.

"What can these wretches want?" asked Madeleine, "what new sacrifice do they demand ? Dishonour Prosper ! They had far better have killed him—I would have said nothing."

M. Fauvel's entrance into the room interrupted Madeleine. The banker was so enraged that he could scarcely speak. "The worthless scoundrel !" he cried : "to think of his daring to accuse me ! to insinuate that I robbed my own safe ! And that Marquis de Clameran, who seems to doubt my integrity." Then, without noticing the effect of his words upon the two women, he proceeded to relate all that had occurred. "I was afraid of something of this sort last night," he said in conclusion ; "this is the result of leading such a life as his has been lately."

Throughout the day Madeleine's devotion to her aunt was severely tried. The generous girl saw disgrace heaped upon the man she loved. She had perfect faith in his innocence ; she felt sure she knew who had laid the trap to ruin him, and yet she did not say a word in his defence. Fearing that Madeleine would suspect her of complicity in the theft, if she remained in bed and betrayed so much agitation, Madame Fauvel rose and dressed for breakfast. It was a dreary meal. No one tasted a morsel. The servants moved about on tiptoe, as silently as if a death had occurred in the family.

About two o'clock a servant came to M. Fauvel's study, and said that the Marquis de Clameran desired to see him. "What !" cried the banker, "does he dare—" Then, after a moments reflection, he added : "Ask him to walk up."

The very name of De Clameran sufficed to arouse all M. Fauvel's slumbering wrath. The victim of a robbery, finding his safe empty at the moment that he was called upon to make a heavy payment, he had been constrained to curb his anger and resentment ; but now he determined to have his revenge upon his insolent visitor. But the marquis declined to come upstairs. The messen-

gor returned with the answer that the gentleman had a particular reason for seeing M. Fauvel in the office below, where the clerks were.

"What does this fresh impertinence mean?" cried the banker, as he angrily jumped up and hastened downstairs.

M. de Clameran was standing the middle of the office adjoining the cashier's room; M. Fauvel walked up to him, and roughly said: "What do you want now, sir? You have been paid your money, and I have your receipt."

To the surprise of all the clerks, and the banker himself, the marquis seemed not in the least offended at this rude greeting, but answered in a deferential though not at all humble manner: "You are hard upon me, sir, but I deserve it, and that is why I am here. A gentleman always acknowledges when he is in the wrong: in this instance I am the offender; and I flatter myself that my past will permit me to say so without being accused of cowardice or lack of self-respect. If I desired to see you here instead of in your study, it was because, having been rude to you in the presence of your clerks, I wished them to be witnesses of my apology for the same."

De Clameran's speech was so different from his usual overbearing, haughty conduct, that the surprised banker could only stammer: "I must say that I was hurt by your doubts, your insinuations—"

"This morning," continued the marquis, "I was irritated, and thoughtlessly gave way to my temper. Although I am greyheaded, my disposition is as excitable as that of a fiery young man of twenty. My words, believe me, did not represent my real thoughts, and I regret them deeply."

M. Fauvel being himself a kind-hearted though quick-tempered man, could understand De Clameran's feelings; and, knowing that his own high reputation for scrupulous honesty could not be affected by any hasty language, he at once calmed down before so frank an apology. Holding out his hand to De Clameran, he said: "Let us forget what happened, sir."

They conversed in a friendly manner for some minutes; and De Clameran, after explaining why he had such pressing need of the money at that particular hour of the morning, turned to leave, saying that he would do himself the honour of calling upon Madame Fauvel. "That is, if a visit just now would not be considered intrusive," he said with a shade of hesitation. "Perhaps after the trouble of this morning, she does not wish to be disturbed."

"Oh, no!" said the banker; "I think a visit would cheer her up. I am obliged to go out on account of this unfortunate affair."

Madame Fauvel was in the same room where Raoul had threatened to kill himself the night before; she looked very ill as she lay on a sofa, with Madeleine seated beside her.

When M. de Clameran was announced, they both started up as if a phantom had appeared before them. Although Louis had been gay and smiling when he parted from M. Fauvel down stairs, he now wore a melancholy aspect, as he gravely bowed, and refused to seat himself in the chair which Madame Fauvel motioned him to take.

"You will excuse me, ladies," he began, "for intruding upon your affliction; but I have a duty to fulfil."

The two women were silent; they seemed to be waiting for him to explain. He therefore added in an undertone: "I know all."

By an imploring gesture, Madame Fauvel tried to stop him. She saw that he was about to reveal her secret to Madeleine. But Louis would not

see this gesture ; he turned his whole attention to Madeleine, who haughtily said : " Explain yourself, sir."

" Only an hour ago," he replied, " I discovered that Raoul last night forced from his mother the key of the safe, and stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Madeleine crimsoned with shame and indignation ; she leaned over the sofa, and seizing her aunt by the wrists shook her violently. " Is it true ? " she asked in a hollow voice ; " is it true ? "

" Alas ! alas ! " groaned Madame Fauvel utterly crushed.

" You have allowed Prosper to be accused," cried the young girl ; " you have suffered him to be arrested and disgraced for life."

" Forgive me," murmured her aunt. " Raoul was about to kill himself ; I was so frightened ! Then you know—Prosper was to share the money with him."

" Oh ! " exclaimed Madeleine indignantly ; " you were told that, and you believed it ! "

De Clameran interrupted them. " Unfortunately," said he in a sad tone, " what your aunt says of M. Bertomy is the truth."

" Your proofs, sir, where are your proofs ? "

" Raoul's confession ? "

" Raoul is a scoundrel ! "

" That is only too true ; but how did he find out the word, if M. Bertomy did not reveal it ? And who left the money in the safe but M. Bertomy ? "

These arguments had no effect upon Madeleine. " And now tell me," she said scornfully, " what became of the money ? "

There was no mistaking the significance of these words ; they meant : " You are the instigator of the robbery, and of course the receiver as well."

This harsh accusation from a girl whom he so passionately loved, when, grasping bandit as he was, he risked for her sake all the money gained by his crimes, so cruelly hurt De Clameran that he turned livid. But he had prepared and studied his part too well, to be at all discouraged. " A day will come, mademoiselle," he said, " when you will deeply regret having treated me so cruelly. I understand your insinuation ; oh ! you need not attempt to deny it—"

" I have no idea of denying anything, sir."

" Madeleine ! " remonstrated Madame Fauvel, who trembled at the rising anger of the man who held her fate in his hands, " Madeleine, have mercy ! "

" Mademoiselle is pitiless," said De Clameran sadly ; " she cruelly punishes an honourable man whose only fault is having obeyed his brother's dying injunctions. And I am here now because I believe in the joint responsibility of all the members of a family." Here he slowly drew from his pocket several bundles of bank-notes, and laid them on the mantle-piece. " Raoul stole three hundred and fifty thousand francs," he said : " I return the same amount. It is more than half my fortune. Willingly would I give the rest to insure this being his last crime."

Too inexperienced to penetrate De Clameran's bold, and yet simple plan, Madeleine was dumb with astonishment ; all her calculations were upset.

Madame Fauvel, on the contrary, accepted this restitution as salvation sent from heaven. " Oh, thanks, sir, thanks ! " she cried, gratefully clasping De Clameran's hands in hers ; " you are goodness itself ! "

Louis's eyes lit up with pleasure. But he rejoiced too soon. A minute's reflection brought back all of Madeleine's distrust. She thought this

generosity unnatural in a man whom she considered incapable of a noble sentiment, and at once concluded that it must conceal some snare beneath.

"What are we to do with this money?" she demanded.

"Restore it to M. Fauvel, mademoiselle."

"We restore it, sir, and how? Restoring the money is denouncing Raoul, and ruining my aunt. Take back your money, sir."

De Clameran was too shrewd to insist; he took up the money and seemed about to leave.

"I comprehend your refusal, mademoiselle, and must find another way of accomplishing my wish. But, before retiring, let me say that your injustice pains me deeply. After the promise you made to me, I had reason to hope for a kinder welcome."

"I will keep my promise, sir, but not until you have furnished security."

"Security! What security? Pray explain yourself."

"Something to protect my aunt against Raoul after my—marriage. What is my dowry to a man who squanders a hundred thousand francs in four months? We are making a bargain; I give you my hand in exchange for my aunt's life and honour, and of course you must give me some security for the performance of your promise."

"Oh! I will give you ample securities," exclaimed De Clameran, "such as will quiet all your suspicious doubts of my good faith. Alas! you will not believe in my devotion; what shall I do to convince you of its sincerity? Shall I try to save M. Bertomy?"

"Thanks for the offer, sir," replied Madeleine disdainfully; "if Prosper is guilty, let him be punished by the law; if he is innocent, God will protect him."

Madeleine and her aunt rose from their seats to signify that the interview was over. De Clameran bowed, and left the room. "What pride! What determination! The idea of her demanding security of me!" he said to himself as he slowly walked away. "But the proud girl shall be humbled yet. She is so beautiful! and, if I did not so madly love her—Well! so much the worse for Raoul!"

Never had De Clameran been so incensed. Madeleine's quiet determination and forethought, which he had not anticipated, had upset his well-laid plan. He was disconcerted, and at a loss how to proceed. He knew that it would be useless to attempt deceiving a girl of Madeleine's character a second time; he saw that though she had not penetrated his motives, she was on the defence, and prepared for any new surprise. Moreover, she would prevent Madame Fauvel from being frightened and forced into submission any longer. At the very moment when Louis thought he had won easily, he met with an adversary. The whole thing would have to be gone over again. Although Madeleine had resigned herself to sacrifice, it was evident that she had no idea of doing so blindly, and would not hazard her aunt's and her own happiness upon the uncertainty of eventual promises. How could he furnish the securities she demanded? What measures could he take to prevent Raoul from importuning his mother in the future. Once De Clameran married, and Raoul become rich, there would be no further reason for disquieting Madame Fauvel. But how prove this to Madeleine? The knowledge of all the circumstances of this shameful and criminal intrigue would have re-assured her upon this point; but then it would never do to inform her of these details, especially before the marriage. What securities then could he give? But De Clameran was not one of those hesitating men who take weeks to consider a difficulty. When he could

not untie a knot, he would cut it. Raoul was a stumbling-block to his wishes, and he swore to rid himself of his troublesome accomplice somehow or other. It was not, however, an easy matter to dispose of so cunning a knave as Raoul. But this consideration could not stop De Clameran. He was incited by one of those passions which age renders terrible. The more certain he was of Madeleine's contempt and dislike, the more determined he was to marry her. But he had sense enough to see that he might ruin his prospects by undue haste, and that the safest course would be to await the result of the accusation against Prosper before moving further in the matter.

He waited in anxious expectation of a summons from Madame Fauvel. But he was again mistaken. On calmly thinking over the two accomplices' last acts, Madeleine came to the conclusion that they would remain quiet for a while; she knew resistance could have no worse results than would cowardly submission, and therefore assumed the entire responsibility of managing the affair so as to keep at bay both Raoul and De Clameran. She knew that Madame Fauvel would be anxious to accept any terms of peace, but determined to use all her influence to prevent her doing this, and to force upon her the necessity of maintaining a firmer and more dignified attitude. This accounted for the silence of the two women, who were quietly waiting for their adversaries to renew hostilities. They even succeeded in concealing their anxiety beneath assumed indifference; never asking any questions about the robbery, or those who were in any way connected with it. M. Fauvel brought them an account of Prosper's examination, the many charges brought against him, his obstinate denial of having stolen the money; and finally, how, after great perplexity and close study of the case by the investigating magistrate, the cashier had been discharged for want of sufficient proof against him. Since De Clameran's offer to replace the money, Madame Fauvel had not doubted Prosper's guilt. She said nothing, but inwardly accused him of having seduced her son from the path of virtue, and enticed him into crime—that son whom she could never cease to love. Madeleine, on the contrary, had perfect faith in Prosper's innocence. She was so sure of it, that, learning that he was about to be set at liberty, she ventured to ask her uncle, under pretext of some charitable object, to give her ten thousand francs, which she sent to the unfortunate victim of circumstantial evidence who, from all that she had heard, was probably in great need of assistance. In the letter—cut from her prayer book to avoid detection by writing—accompanying the money, she advised Prosper to leave France, because she knew that it would be impossible for a man of his proud nature to remain on the scene of his disgrace. Besides, Madeleine, at that time, feeling that she would be obliged sooner or later to marry De Clameran, was anxious to have the man she loved, far, far away from her. And yet, on the day that this anonymous present was sent, in opposition to the wishes of Madame Fauvel, the two poor women were fearfully entangled in pecuniary difficulties. The tradesmen, whose money had been squandered by Raoul, refused to give credit any longer, and insisted upon their bills being paid at once; saying they could not understand how a man of M. Fauvel's wealth and position could keep them waiting for such insignificant amounts. One was owed two thousand, another one thousand, and a third only five hundred francs. The butcher, the grocer, and the wine merchant, would call together, and Madame Fauvel had the greatest difficulty in prevailing upon them to accept something on account. Some of them threatened to apply to the

banker. Madame Fauvel's indebtedness amounted to almost fifteen thousand francs. Madeleine and her aunt had declined all invitations during the winter, to avoid spending money on dress. But at last they were obliged to appear in public. M. Fauvel's most intimate friends, the Messrs. Jandidier, were about to give a splendid ball, and, as fate would have it, a fancy ball, which would require the purchasing of costumes. Where was the money to come from? They had been owing a large bill to their dressmaker for over a year. Would she consent to furnish them with any more dresses on credit? Madeleine's new maid, Palmyre Chocareille, extricated them from this difficulty. This girl who seemed to have suffered all the minor ills of life—which, after all, were the hardest to bear—seemed to have divined her mistress's anxiety. At any rate, she voluntarily informed Madeleine that a friend of hers, a first class dressmaker, had just set up for herself, and would be glad to furnish materials and make the dresses on credit, for the sake of obtaining the patronage of Madame Fauvel and her niece, which would at once bring her plenty of fashionable customers. But this was not all. Neither of them could go to the ball without jewellery; and every jewel they owned had been taken by Raoul, and pawned, and he had the tickets. After thinking the matter over, Madeleine decided to ask Raoul to devote some of the stolen money to redeeming the jewels he had forced from his mother. She informed her aunt of her plan, saying: "Make an appointment with Raoul: he will not dare to refuse you; and I will go in your stead." And, two days after, the courageous girl took a cab, and, regardless of the inclement weather, went to Vésinet. She had no idea, then, that M. Verduret and Prosper were following close behind her, and that they witnessed her interview from the top of a ladder. Her bold step, however, was fruitless. Raoul swore that he had shared with Prosper; that his own half was spent, and that he was quite without money. He even refused to give up the pawn-tickets; and Madeleine had to insist most energetically before she could induce him to give up four or five trifling articles that were absolutely indispensable. De Clameran had ordered him to refuse, because he hoped that in their distress they would apply to him for help. Raoul had obeyed, but only after a violent altercation witnessed by De Clameran's new valet, Joseph Dubois. The accomplices were at that time on very bad terms together. The marquis was seeking a safe means of getting rid of Raoul; and the young scamp had a sort of presentiment of his uncle's friendly intentions. Nothing but the certainty of impending danger could reconcile them; and this was revealed to them at the Jandidier ball. Who was the mysterious mountebank that had indulged in such transparent allusions to Madame Fauvel's private troubles, and then said with threatening significance to Louis: "I was your brother Gaston's friend!"

Who he was, where he came from, they could not imagine; but they clearly saw that he was a dangerous enemy, and forthwith attempted to assassinate him upon his leaving the ball. Having followed him and then having lost him, they became alarmed: "We cannot be too guarded in our conduct," whispered De Clameran; "we shall know only too soon who he is."

Once more, Raoul tried to induce him to give up his project of marrying Madeleine. "Never!" he exclaimed: "I will marry her, or perish!"

They thought that, now they were warned, the danger of their being caught was lessened. But they did not know the sort of man who was on their track,

XXII.

SUCH are the facts that, with an almost incredible talent for investigation, had been collected and prepared by M. Verduret, the stout man with the jovial face who had taken Prosper under his protection. Reaching Paris at nine o'clock at night, not by the Lyons train as he had announced, but by the Orleans one, M. Verduret had hastened to the Hotel of the Grand Archangel, where he had found the cashier impatiently expecting him.

"You are about to hear something extraordinary," he had said to Prosper, "and you will see how far back one has to seek into the past, for the primary causes of a crime. All things are linked together and dependent upon each other in this world of ours. If Gaston de Clameran had not entered a little café at Tarascon to play a game of billiards twenty years ago, your safe would not have been robbed three weeks back. Valentine de La Verberie is punished in 1866 for the murders committed for her sake in 1840. Nothing is ever lost or forgotten. Listen."

And he forthwith related all that he had discovered, referring, as he went along to his notes and the voluminous manuscript which he had prepared. During the entire week, M. Verduret had not perhaps taken in all twenty-four hours' rest, but he bore no great traces of fatigue. His iron muscles braved any amount of labour, and his elastic nature was too well tempered to give way beneath such pressure. While any other man would have sunk exhausted in a chair, he stood up and described, with the enthusiasm and captivating animation peculiar to him, the minutest details and intricacies of the plot that he had devoted his whole energy to unravelling; personating, so to say, every character he brought upon the scene, so that his listener was bewildered and dazzled by his brilliant acting. As Prosper listened to this narrative of events happening twenty years back, the secret conversations as minutely related as if overheard the moment they took place, it sounded to him more like a romance than a plain statement of facts. All these ingenious explanations might be logical, but what foundation did they possess? Might they not be the dream of an excited imagination?

M. Verduret did not finish his report until four o'clock in the morning; then he exclaimed triumphantly: "And now they are on their guard; they are wary rascals too; but I can laugh at their efforts, for I have them safe. Before a week is over, Prosper, your innocence will be recognised by every one. I promised your father this."

"Is it possible?" murmured Prosper in a dazed way; "is it possible?"

"What?"

"All this you have just told me."

M. Verduret bounded like a man little accustomed to have the accuracy of his information doubted. "Is it possible, indeed?" he cried; "but it is truth itself, truth founded on fact and exposed in all its impressiveness!"

"But how can such rascalities take place in Paris, in our very midst, without—"

"Ah!" interrupted the stout man, "you are young, my friend! Crimes worse than this happen, and you know nothing of them. You think the horrors of the assize-court are the only ones. Pooh! You only read in the 'Gazette des Tribunaux' of the bloody melodramas of life, where the actors, low-born villains, are as cowardly as the knife, or as stupid as the poison they use. It is at the family fireside, often under shelter of the law

itself, that the real tragedies of life are acted ; in these days traitors wear gloves, scoundrels cloak themselves in public esteem, and their victims die broken-hearted, but smiling to the last. What I have just related to you is almost an every-day occurrence ; and yet you profess astonishment."

"I can't help wondering how you discovered all this tissue of crime."

"Ah, that is the point!" said M. Verduret, with a self-satisfied smile. "When I undertake a task, I devote my whole attention to it. Now, make a note of this: When a man of ordinary intelligence concentrates his thoughts and energies upon the attainment of an object, he is almost always certain to ultimately obtain success. Besides that, I have my own means of working up a case."

"Still I don't see what grounds you had to go upon."

"To be sure, one needs some light to guide one in a dark affair like this. But the fire in De Clameran's eye at the mention of Gaston's name ignited my lantern. From that moment I walked straight to the solution of the mystery, as to a beacon."

Prosper's eager, questioning looks showed that he would like to know the secret of his protector's wonderful penetration, and at the same time be more thoroughly convinced that what he had heard was all true—that his innocence would be clearly proved.

"Now confess," cried M. Verduret, "you would give something to know how I discovered the truth."

"I certainly would, for to me it seems marvellous!"

M. Verduret enjoyed Prosper's bewilderment. To be sure, he was neither a good judge nor a distinguished amateur ; but sincere admiration is always flattering, no matter whence it comes. "Well," he replied, "I will explain my system. There is nothing marvellous about it as you will soon see. We worked together to find the solution of the problem, so you know my reason for suspecting De Clameran as the prime mover in the robbery. As soon as I had arrived at this conclusion my task was easy. You want to know what I did? I placed trustworthy people to watch the parties in whom I was most interested. Joseph Dubois took charge of De Clameran, and Nina Gipsy never lost sight of Madame Fauvel and her niece."

"I know, and I cannot comprehend how Nina ever consented to this service."

"That is my secret," replied M. Verduret. "Having the assistance of good eyes and quick ears on the spot, I went to Beaucaire to inquire into the past, so as to link it with what I was sure to learn of the present. The next day I was at Clameran ; and the first step I took was to find the son of Jean, the old valet. An honest fellow he is, too ; open and simple as nature herself ; and he at once guessed that I wanted to purchase some madder."

"Madder?" said Prosper with a puzzled look.

"Of course I wanted to buy his madder. I did not appear to him as I do to you now. He had madder for sale, that was evident ; so we began to bargain about the price. The debate lasted almost all day, during which time we drank a dozen bottles of wine. About supper-time, Jean, the younger, was as drunk as a barrel, and I had purchased nine hundred francs' worth of madder which your father will sell for me." Prosper looked so astonished that M. Verduret laughed heartily. "I risked nine hundred francs," he continued, "but thread by thread I gathered the whole history of the De Clamerans, Gaston's love affair, his flight, and the

stumbling of the horse ridden by Louis. I found also that about a year ago Louis returned and sold the château to a man named Fongeroux, whose wife, Mihonne, had a secret interview with Louis the day of the purchase. I went to see Mihonne. Poor woman! her rascally husband has pounded nearly all the sense out of her; she is almost idiotic. I convinced her that I came from some De Clameran or other, and she at once related to me everything she knew." The apparent simplicity of this mode of investigation confounded Prosper. "From that time," continued M. Verduret, "the skein began to disentangle; I held the principal thread. I now set about finding out what had become of Gaston. Lafourcade, who is a friend of your father, informed me that he had bought an iron foundry at Oloron, had settled there, and died soon after."

"You are certainly indefatigable!" said Prosper.

"No, but I always strike when the iron is hot. At Oloron, I met Manuel, who had gone there to make a little visit before returning to Spain. From him I obtained a complete history of Gaston's life, and all the particulars of his death. Manuel also told me of Louis's visit; and an inn-keeper described a young workman who was there at the same time, whom I at once recognised as Raoul."

"But how did you know of all the conversations between the villains?" asked Prosper.

"You evidently think I have been drawing upon my imagination. You will soon think the contrary. While I was at work at Oloron, my assistants here did not sit with their hands in their pockets. Mutually distrustful, De Clameran and Raoul preserved all the letters they received from each other. Joseph Dubois copied most of them, and had the more important ones photographed, and forwarded the copies to me. Nina spent her time listening at all the doors, and sent me a faithful report of everything she heard. Finally, I have at the Fauvels' another means of investigation, which I will reveal to you later."

"I understand it now," murmured Prosper.

"And what have you been doing during my absence, my young friend?" asked M. Verduret.

At this question Prosper turned crimson. But he knew that it would never do to keep silent about his imprudent step. "Alas!" he stammered, "I read in a newspaper that De Clameran was about to marry Madeleine; and I acted like a fool."

"What did you do?" inquired M. Verduret anxiously.

"I sent M. Fauvel an anonymous letter, in which I insinuated that his wife was in love with Raoul—"

M. Verduret here brought his clenched fist down upon the little table near which he sat, and broke it. "Wretched man!" he cried, "you have probably ruined everything." A great change came over him. His usually jovial face assumed a menacing expression. He rose from his seat, and strode up and down the room, oblivious of the lodgers on the floor below. "But you must be a baby," added he to the dismayed Prosper, "an idiot, or, worse than that, a fool."

"Sir!"

"Here you are drowning; a brave man springs into the water after you, and just as he is on the point of saving you, you cling to his feet to prevent him swimming! What did I tell you to do?"

"To keep quiet, and not to go out."

"Well!"

The consciousness of having done a foolish thing made Prosper as frightened as a schoolboy, accused by his teacher of playing truant. "It was night, sir," he said, "and, having a violent headache, I took a walk along the quays. I thought there would be no harm in my entering a café; I took up a paper and read the dreadful announcement."

"Was it not settled that you should have perfect confidence in me?"

"You were not here, sir; this announcement had quite upset me; you were far away, and might have been surprised by an unexpected—"

"Nothing is unexpected except to a fool!" declared M. Verduret peremptorily. "To write an anonymous letter! Do you know to what you expose me? You are the cause of my perhaps breaking a sacred promise made to one of the few persons whom I highly esteem among my fellow beings. I shall be looked upon as a cheat, a dastard, I, who—" He stopped abruptly, as if afraid of saying too much, and it was only after some minutes that, having become calm again, he resumed: "It is no use crying over what is done. We must try and get out of the mess somehow. When and where did you post this letter?"

"Last night, in the Rue du Cardinal Lemoine. It hardly reached the bottom of the box before I regretted having written it."

"Your regrets should have come sooner. What time was it?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Then your sweet little letter must have reached M. Fauvel this morning with his other correspondence; probably he was alone in his study when he opened and read it."

"It is not probable, it is certain."

"Can you recall the exact words of your letter? Stop and think, for it is very important that I should know."

"Oh, it is unnecessary for me to reflect. I remember the letter as if I had just written it." And he repeated almost verbatim what he had written.

M. Verduret listened most attentively with a perplexed frown upon his face. "That is a formidable anonymous letter," he murmured, "to come from a person who does not deal in such things. It insinuates everything without specifying a single thing; it is vague, jeering, and treacherous. Repeat it to me." Prosper obeyed, and his second version did not vary from the first in a single word. "Nothing could be more alarming than that allusion to the cashier," said the stout man, repeating the words after Prosper. "The question, 'Is it also he who has stolen Madame Fauvel's diamonds?' is simply horrible? What could be more exasperating than the sarcastic advice, 'In your place, I would not have any public scandal, but would watch my wife?' The effect of your letter must have been terrible," he added thoughtfully, as he stood with folded arms in front of Prosper. "M. Fauvel is quick-tempered, is he not?"

"He has a very violent temper."

"Then the mischief is perhaps not irreparable."

"What! do you suppose—"

"I think that an impulsive man is afraid of himself, and seldom carries out his first intentions. That is our only chance. If, upon the receipt of your bomb-shell, M. Fauvel, unable to restrain himself, rushed into his wife's room, exclaiming, 'Where are your diamonds?' our plans are done for. I know Madame Fauvel, she will confess all."

"Why would this be so disastrous?"

"Because, the moment Madame Fauvel opens her lips to her husband, our birds will take flight."

Prosper had never thought of this eventuality.

"Then, again," continued M. Verduret, "it would deeply distress another person."

"Any one whom I know."

"Yes, my friend, and very well too. I should certainly be vexed to the last degree, if these two rascals escape without my being thoroughly informed about them."

"It seems to me that you know sufficient."

M. Verduret shrugged his shoulders, and asked: "Did you not perceive any gaps in my narrative?"

"Not one."

"That is because you don't know how to listen. In the first place, did Louis de Clameran poison his brother, or not?"

"Yes; I am sure of it, from what you tell me."

"There you are! You are much more certain, young man, than I am. Your opinion is mine; but what decisive proof have we? None. I skillfully questioned Dr. C. He has not the shadow of a suspicion; and Dr. C. is no quack; he is a learned and observing man of high standing. What poisons produce the effects described? I know of none; and yet I have studied all sorts of poisons, from the digitalis used by La Pommeraye to Madame Sauvresy's aconite."

"The death took place so opportunely—"

"That anybody would suspect foul play. That is true; but chance is sometimes a wonderful accomplice in crime. In the second place, I know nothing of Raoul's antecedents."

"Is information on that point necessary?"

"Indispensable, my friend; but we will soon know something. I have sent one of my men—excuse me, I mean one of my friends—who is very expert, M. Pâlot; and he writes that he is on the track. I am interested in the history of this sentimental, sceptical young rascal. I have an idea that, had he not known De Clameran, he might have been a brave, honest sort of youth."

Prosper was no longer listening. M. Verduret's words had inspired him with confidence. Already he saw the guilty men arraigned before the bar of justice; and enjoyed, in anticipation, this assize-court drama, where he would be publicly righted, after having been so openly dishonoured. More than that, he now understood Madeleine, her strange conduct at the dress-maker's was explained, and he knew that she had never ceased to love him. This certainty of future happiness restored all the self-possession that had deserted him the day he found the safe robbed. For the first time he was astonished at the peculiarity of his situation. Prosper had at first only been surprised at the protection of M. Verduret and the extent of his investigations; now he asked himself, what could have been his friend's motives for acting thus? In a word, what price did he expect for this sacrifice of time and labour? His anxiety was so great on this point that he suddenly exclaimed: "You have no longer the right, sir, to preserve your incognito with me. When you have saved the honour and life of a man, you should at least let him know whom he has to thank."

"Oh!" said M. Verduret smilingly; "you are not out of the mess yet. You are not married either; so you must, for a few days longer, have patience and faith." The clock struck six. "Good heavens!" he added. "Can it be six o'clock? I did hope to have a good night's rest, but this is no time for sleeping." He went on to the landing, and leaning over the balusters, called: "Madame Alexandre! I say, Madame Alexandre!"

The hostess of the Grand Archangel, the portly wife of Fanferlot, the squirrel, had evidently not been to bed. This fact struck Prosper. She appeared, obsequious, smiling, and eager to please. "What do you require, gentlemen?" she inquired.

"You can send me your—Joseph Dubois, and also Palmyre, as soon as possible. Have them sent for at once, and let me know when they arrive. I will take a little rest in the meantime."

As soon as Madame Alexandre left the room, the stout man unceremoniously threw himself on the bed. "You have no objection, I suppose," he said to Prosper. In five minutes he was fast asleep; and Prosper, more perplexed than ever, seated himself in an easy chair and wondered who this strange man could be. About nine o'clock some one tapped timidly at the door. Slight as the noise was, it aroused M. Verduret, who sprang up, and called out: "Who is there?" But Prosper had already opened the door. Joseph Dubois, the Marquis de Clameran's valet, entered. M. Verduret's assistant was breathless from running; and his little eyes were more restless than ever.

"Well, master, I am glad to see you once more," he cried. "Now you can tell me what to do; I have been perfectly lost during your absence, and have felt like a puppet with a broken string."

"What! you allow yourself to be disconcerted like that?"

"Bless me! I think I had cause for alarm when I could not find you anywhere. Yesterday afternoon I sent you three telegrams, to the addresses you gave me, at Lyons, Beaucaire, and Oloron, and received no answer. I was almost going crazy when your message reached me just now."

"Things are getting warm, then."

"Warm! They are burning! The place is too hot to hold me any longer."

Whilst speaking, M. Verduret occupied himself in repairing his toilet, which had become disarranged during his sleep. When he had finished, he threw himself in an easy chair, and said to Joseph Dubois, who remained respectfully standing, cap in hand, like a soldier awaiting orders: "Explain yourself, my lad, and quickly, if you please; no long phrases."

"It is just this, sir. I don't know what your plans are, or what means you have of carrying them out; but you must wind up this affair and strike your final blow very quickly."

"That is your opinion, Master Joseph!"

"Yes, master, because if you wait any longer, good-bye to our covey; you will only find an empty cage, and the birds flown. You smile? Yes, I know you are clever, and can accomplish anything; but they are cunning blades, and as slippery as eels. They know, too, that they are watched."

"The devil they do!" cried M. Verduret. "Some one must have blundered."

"Oh! nobody has done anything wrong," replied Joseph. "You know that they suspected something long ago. They gave you a proof of it, the night of the fancy dress ball; I mean that ugly cut on your arm. Ever since they have always slept with one eye open. They were feeling easier, however, when all of a sudden, yesterday, they began to smell a rat!"

"Was that why you sent me those telegrams?"

"Of course. Now listen: yesterday morning when my master got up, about ten o'clock, he took it into his head to arrange the papers in his desk; which, by the way, has a disgusting lock which has given me a deal of trouble. Meanwhile, I pretended to be making up the fire, so as to remain

in the room to watch him. That man has a Yankee's eye! At the first glance he saw, or rather divined, that his papers had been meddled with; he turned as white as a sheet, and swore an oath, such an oath!"

"Never mind the oath; go on."

"Well, how he discovered his letters had been touched I can't imagine. You know how careful I am. I had put everything back in its place just as I found it. To make sure he was not mistaken, the marquis picks up each paper, one at a time, turns it over, and smells it. I was just longing to offer him a microscope, when all of a sudden he sprang up, and kicking his chair to the other end of the room, flew at me in a fury. 'Somebody has been at my papers,' he shrieked; 'this letter has been photographed!' B-r-r-r! I am not a coward, but I can tell you that my heart stood perfectly still; I saw myself dead, cut into mince-meat; and I even said to myself, 'Fanfer—excuse me—Dubois, my friend, you are done for.' And I thought of Madame Alexandre."

M. Verduret was buried in thought, and paid no attention to the worthy Joseph's analysis of his personal sensations. "What happened next?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Why, I was needlessly frightened after all. The rascal did not dare to touch me. To be sure, I had taken the precaution to get out of his reach; we talked with a large table between us. While wondering what could have enabled him to discover the secret, I defended myself with virtuous indignation. I said: 'It cannot be; Monsieur the Marquis is mistaken. Who would dare touch his papers?' Bah! Instead of listening to me, he flourished an open letter, saying: 'This letter has been photographed! here is proof of it!' and he pointed to a little yellow spot on the paper, shrieking out: 'Look! Smell! It is—' I forget the name he called it, but some acid used by photographers."

"I know, I know," said M. Verduret; "go on; what next?"

"Then we had a scene; such a scene! He ended by seizing me by the coat collar, and shaking me like a plum-tree, to make me tell him who I am, who I know, and where I came from. As if I know, myself! I was obliged to account for every minute of my time since I had been in his service. He was born to be an investigating magistrate. Then he sent for the hotel waiter, who attends to his rooms, and questioned him closely, but in English, so that I could not understand. After a while he cooled down, and when the waiter was gone, presented me with twenty francs, saying: 'I am sorry I was so hasty with you; you are too stupid to have been guilty of the offence.'"

"He said that, did he?"

"He used those very words to my face, master."

"And you think he meant what he said?"

"Certainly I do."

The stout man smiled, and whistled in a way that showed that he had a different opinion. "If you think that," he said, "De Clameran was right. You are not up to much."

It was easy to see that Joseph Dubois was anxious to give his grounds for his opinion, but dared not. "I suppose I *am* stupid, if you think so," he replied humbly. "Well, after he had done blustering about the letters, the marquis dressed and went out. He would not take his carriage, but hired a cab at the hotel door. I thought he would perhaps disappear for ever; but I was mistaken. About five o'clock he returned as gay as a lark. During his absence, I telegraphed to you."

"What! did you not follow him?"

"No; but one of our friends did, and this friend gave me a report of the dandy's movements. First he went to a broker's, then to a bank and a discount office. It is evident he is a man of capital. I expect he intends to go on a little trip somewhere."

"Is that all he did?"

"That is all; yes. But I must tell you that the rascals tried to get Mademoiselle Palmyre shut up, 'administratively,' you understand. Fortunately, you had anticipated something of the kind, and given orders so as to prevent it. But for you, she would now be in prison." Joseph left off speaking, and looked up at the ceiling by way of trying to remember whether he had not something more to say. Finding nothing, he added: "That is all. I rather think M. Patrigent will rub his hands with delight when I take him my report. He has no idea of the facts collected to swell the size of his Dossier No. 113."

There was a long silence. Joseph was right in supposing that the crisis had come. M. Verduret was arranging his plan of battle while waiting for the report of Nina—now Palmyre—upon which depended his point of attack.

But Joseph Dubois was restless and uneasy. "What am I to do now, master?" he asked.

"Return to the hotel; probably your master has noticed your absence; but he will say nothing about it, so continue—"

Here an exclamation from Prosper, who was standing near the window, interrupted M. Verduret. "What is the matter?" he inquired.

"De Clameran is there!" replied Prosper.

M. Verduret and Joseph ran to the window. "Where is he?" they asked.

"There, at the corner of the bridge, behind that orange-woman's stall."

Prosper was right. It was the noble Marquis de Clameran, who, hid behind the stall, was watching for his servant to come out of the Grand Archangel. At first the quick-sighted Verduret had some doubts whether it was the marquis, who, being skilled in these hazardous expeditions, managed to conceal himself almost entirely. But a moment came, when, elbowed by the pressing crowd, he was obliged to get off the pavement in full view of the window.

"Now you see I was right!" cried the cashier.

"Well," murmured Joseph, convinced, "I am amazed!"

M. Verduret seemed not in the least surprised, but quietly said: "The hunter is now being hunted. Well, Joseph, my boy, do you still think that your noble master was duped by your pretended injured innocence?"

"You stated the contrary, sir," replied Joseph in a humble tone; "and a statement from you is more convincing than all the proofs in the world."

"This pretended outburst of rage was premeditated on the part of your noble master. Knowing that he is being tracked, he naturally wishes to discover who his adversaries are. You can imagine how uncomfortable he must be whilst in this uncertainty. Perhaps he thinks his pursuers are some of his old accomplices, who, being hungry, want a piece of his cake. He will remain there until you go out; then he will come in to inquire who you are."

"But I can leave without his seeing me."

"Yes, I know. You will climb the little wall separating the hotel from the wine-merchant's yard, and keep along the stationer's area, until you reach the Rue de la Huchette."

Poor Joseph looked as if he had just received a bucket of ice-water upon

his head. "Exactly the way I was going," he gasped out. "I heard that you knew all the houses in Paris, and it certainly must be so."

The stout man made no reply to Joseph's admiring remarks. He was wondering what advantage he could reap from De Clameran's behaviour. As to the cashier, he listened wonderingly, watching these strangers, who without any apparent reason, seemed determined to win the difficult game in which his honour, his happiness, and his life, were the stake.

"I have another idea," said Joseph after deep thought.

"What is it?"

"I can walk quietly out of the front door, and with my hands in my pockets stroll slowly back to the Hotel du Louvre."

"And then?"

"Well! then, De Clameran will come in and question Madame Alexandre, whom you can instruct beforehand; and she is smart enough to put any joker off the track."

"Bad plan!" pronounced M. Verduret decidedly; "a scamp so compromised as De Clameran is not easily taken in; it will be impossible to reassure him." His mind was made up; for in a brief tone of authority, which admitted of no contradiction, he added: "I have a better plan. Has De Clameran, since he found out that his papers had been touched, seen De Lagors?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps he has written to him?"

"I'll bet you my head he has not. Having your orders to watch his correspondence, I invented a little system which informs me every time he touches a pen; during the last twenty-four hours the pens have not been touched."

"De Clameran went out yesterday afternoon."

"But the man who followed him says he wrote nothing on the way."

"Then we have time yet!" cried Verduret. "Be quick! I give you fifteen minutes to make yourself another head; you know the sort; I will watch the rascal until you are ready."

The delighted Joseph disappeared in a twinkling, and Prosper and M. Verduret remained at the window observing De Clameran, who, according to the movements of the crowd, kept disappearing and reappearing, but was evidently determined not to quit his post until he had obtained the information he sought.

"Why do you devote yourself exclusively to the marquis?" asked Prosper.

"Because, my friend," replied M. Verduret, "because—that is my business, and not yours."

Joseph Dubois had been granted a quarter of an hour in which to metamorphose himself; before ten minutes had elapsed he re-appeared. The dandified coachman with whiskers, red vest, and foppish manners, was replaced by a sinister-looking individual, whose very appearance was enough to scare any rogue. His black cravat twisted round a paper collar, and ornamented by an imitation diamond pin; his black frock-coat buttoned up to the chin; his greasy hat and shiny boots and heavy cane—revealed the myrmidon of the Rue de Jérusalem, as plainly as the uniform denotes the soldier. Joseph Dubois had vanished, and from his livery, phoenix-like and triumphant, rose the radiant Fanferlot, surnamed the Squirrel. When he entered the room, Prosper uttered a cry of surprise, almost of terror. He recognised the man who had assisted the

commissary of police in his investigation at the bank on the day of the robbery.

M. Verduret examined his follower with a satisfied look, and said: "Not bad! There is enough of the police-court air about you to alarm even an honest man. You understand me perfectly."

Fanferlot was transported with delight at this compliment. "What must I do now, chief?" he inquired.

"Nothing difficult for a smart man: but remember, upon the precision of our movements depends the success of my plan. Before occupying myself with De Lagors, I wish to dispose of De Clameran. Now that the rascals are separated, we must prevent their coming together again."

"I understand," said Fanferlot, winking his eye; "I am to create a diversion."

"Exactly. Go out by the Rue de la Huchette, and hasten to the Pont St. Michel; loaf along the river-bank, and finally place yourself on some of the steps of the quay, so that De Clameran may perceive he is being watched. If he fails to see you, do something to attract his attention."

"I know! I will throw a stone in the water," said Fanferlot, rubbing his hands with delight at his own brilliant idea.

"As soon as De Clameran has seen you," continued M. Verduret, "he will be alarmed, and instantly decamp. You must follow him, and he, knowing that the police are after him, will do everything to escape you. You must keep both your eyes open for he is a cunning rascal."

"I was not born yesterday."

"So much the better. You can convince him of that. Well, knowing you are at his heels, he will not dare to return to the Hotel du Louvre, for fear of finding some troublesome visitors awaiting him. Now, it is very important that he should not return to the hotel."

"But suppose he does?" said Fanferlot.

M. Verduret thought for a minute, and then replied: "It is not at all likely; but if he should, you must wait until he comes out again, and continue to follow him. But he won't enter the hotel; very likely he will take the train; but in that event don't lose sight of him, no matter if you have to follow him to Siberia. Have you money with you?"

"I will get some from Madame Alexandre."

"Very good. Ah! one word more. If the rascal does take the train, send me a line here. If he beats about the bush until night time, be on your guard, especially in lonely places; he is capable of anything."

"If necessary, may I fire?"

"Don't be rash; but, if he attacks you, of course defend yourself. Come, 'tis time you were gone."

"Dubois-Fanferlot went out. M. Verduret and Prosper resumed their post of observation. "Why all this secrecy?" inquired Prosper. "De Clameran is guilty of ten times worse crimes than I was ever accused of, and yet my disgrace was made as public as possible."

"Don't you understand," replied the stout man, "that I wish to separate Raoul's cause from that of the marquis? But, hush! Look!" De Clameran had left his place near the orange-woman's stand, and approached the parapet of the bridge, where he seemed to be trying to make out some unexpected object. "Ah!" murmured M. Verduret; he has just discovered our man. De Clameran's uneasiness was quite apparent; he walked forward a few steps, as if intending to cross the bridge; then, suddenly turn-

ing round, walked rapidly away in the direction of the Rue St. Jacques. "He is caught!" cried M. Verduret with delight.

At that moment the door opened, and Madame Nina Gipsy, *alias* Palmyre Chocareille, entered. Poor Nina! Each day since she entered Madeleine's service seemed to have aged her a year. Tears had dimmed the brilliancy of her beautiful black eyes; her rosy cheeks were pale and hollow, and her merry smile was quite gone. Poor Gipsy, once so gay and spirited, now crushed beneath the burden of her sorrows, was the picture of misery. Prosper thought that, wild with joy at seeing him, and proud of having so nobly devoted herself to his interests, Nina would throw her arms around his neck, and hold him in a tight embrace. He was mistaken; and though entirely devoted to Madeleine since he knew the reason of her harshness to him, his deception affected him deeply. Nina scarcely seemed to know him. She saluted him timidly, almost like a stranger. She stood looking at M. Verduret with a mixture of fear and devotion, like a poor dog that has been cruelly treated by its master.

He, however, was kind and gentle in his manner towards her. "Well, my dear," he asked encouragingly, "what news do you bring me?"

"Something is going on at the house, sir, and I have been trying to get here to tell you; at last, Mademoiselle Madeleine made an excuse for sending me out."

"You must thank her for her confidence in me. I suppose she carried out the plan we decided upon?"

"Yes, sir."

"She receives the Marquis de Clameran's visits?"

"Since the marriage has been decided upon, he comes every day, and mademoiselle receives him with kindness. He seems to be delighted."

These answers filled Prosper with anger and alarm. The poor fellow, not comprehending M. Verduret's intricate moves, felt as if he were being tossed about from pillar to post, and made the tool and laughing-stock of everybody. "What!" he cried; "this worthless Marquis de Clameran, an assassin, and a thief, allowed to visit at M. Fauvel's, and pay his addresses to Madeleine? Where are the promises which you made me, sir? Have you merely been amusing yourself by raising my hopes, to dash them—"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Verduret harshly; "you are really too good a young man to understand anything, my friend. If you are incapable of helping yourself, at least have sense enough to refrain from stupidly importuning those who are working for you. Do you not think you have already done sufficient mischief?" Having administered this rebuke, he turned to Nina, and said in softer tones: "Go on, my child; what have you discovered?"

"Nothing positive, sir; but enough to make me nervous, and fearful of impending danger. I am not certain, but suspect from appearances, that some dreadful catastrophe is about to happen. It may only be a presentiment. I cannot get any information from Madame Fauvel; she moves about like a ghost, never opening her lips. She seems to be afraid of her niece, and to be trying to conceal something from her."

"What about M. Fauvel?"

• "I was just about to tell you, sir. Some fearful misfortune has happened to him, you may depend upon it. He wanders about as if he had lost his mind. Something certainly occurred yesterday; his voice even is changed. He is so harsh and irritable that mademoiselle and M. Lucien were wondering what could be the matter with him. He seems to be on the eve of

giving way to a burst of anger ; and there is a wild, strange look about his eyes, especially when he looks at madame. Yesterday evening, when M. de Clameran was announced, he jumped up, and hurried out of the room, saying that he had some work to do in his study."

A triumphant exclamation from M. Verduret interrupted Nina. He was radiant. "Ah !" he said to Prosper, forgetting his bad humour of a few minutes before ; "ah ! what did I tell you ?"

"He has evidently—"

"Been afraid to give way to his first impulse ; of course he has. He is now seeking for proofs of your assertions. He must have them by this time. Did the ladies go out yesterday ?"

"Yes, a part of the day."

"What became of M. Fauvel ?"

"The ladies took me with them ; we left M. Fauvel at home."

"There is no longer a doubt, now !" cried the stout man ; "he looked for proofs, and found them too ! Your letter told him exactly where to go. Ah, Prosper, that unfortunate letter gives more trouble than everything else together."

These words seemed to throw a sudden light on Nina's mind. "I understand it now !" she exclaimed. "M. Fauvel knows everything."

"That is, he thinks he knows everything ; and what he has been led to believe, is worse than the true state of affairs."

"That accounts for the order which M. Cavillon overheard him give to his valet, Evariste."

"What order ?"

"He told Evariste to bring every letter that came to the house, no matter to whom addressed, into his study, and hand it to him ; saying that, if this order was disobeyed, he should be instantly discharged."

"At what time was this order given ?" asked M. Verduret.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"That is what I was afraid of," cried M. Verduret. "He has clearly made up his mind what course to pursue, and is keeping quiet so as to make his vengeance more sure. The question is, Have we still time to counteract his projects ? Have we time to convince him that the anonymous letter was incorrect in some of its assertions ?"

He tried to hit upon some plan for repairing the damage done by Prosper's foolish letter. "Thank you for your information, my dear child," he said after a long silence. "I will decide at once what steps to take, for it will never do to sit quietly and let things go on in this way. Return home without delay, and be careful of everything you say and do ; for M. Fauvel suspects you of being in the plot. Send me word of anything that happens, no matter how insignificant it may be."

Nina, thus dismissed, did not move, but asked timidly : "What about Caldas, sir ?"

This was the third time during the last fortnight that Prosper had heard this name, Caldas. The first time, it had been whispered in his ear by a respectable-looking, middle-aged man, who promised him his protection on one of the days he was at the Préfecture. The second time, the investigating magistrate had mentioned it in connection with Nina's history. Prosper thought over all the men he had ever been connected with, but could recall none named Caldas.

The impassible M. Verduret started and trembled at the sound of this

name, but, quickly recovering himself, said: "I promised to find him for you, and I will keep my promise. Now you must go; good-bye."

It was twelve o'clock, and M. Verduret suddenly remembered that he was hungry. He called Madame Alexandre, and the all-powerful hostess of the Grand Archangel soon placed a tempting breakfast before Prosper and his protector. But the dainty meal failed to smooth M. Verduret's perplexed brow. To the eager questions and complimentary remarks of Madame Alexandre, he merely answered: "Hush, hush! let me alone; keep quiet."

For the first time since he had known the stout man, Prosper saw him betray anxiety and hesitation. He remained silent as long as he could, and then uneasily said: "I am afraid I have embarrassed you very much, sir."

"Yes, you have dreadfully embarrassed me," replied M. Verduret. "What on earth to do now, I don't know! Shall I hasten matters, or keep quiet and wait for the next move? And I am bound by a sacred promise. Come, I must go and consult the investigating magistrate. He can perhaps assist me. You had better come too."

XXIII.

As M. Verduret had anticipated, Prosper's anonymous letter had a terrible effect upon M. Fauvel. It was morning; M. Fauvel had just entered his study to attend to his correspondence. After opening a dozen letters on business, his eyes fell on the fatal missive. Something about the handwriting struck him as peculiar. It was evidently disguised, and although, owing to the fact of his being a millionaire, he was in the habit of receiving anonymous communications, sometimes abusive, but generally begging for money, this particular letter filled him with a presentiment of evil. With absolute certainty that he was about to read of some calamity, he broke the seal, and unfolding the coarse writing-paper of the café, commenced to read. What he read was a terrible blow to a man whose life hitherto had been an unbroken chain of prosperity, who could recall the past without one bitter regret, without remembering any sorrow deep enough to bring forth a tear. What! his wife deceive him! And among all men, to choose one vile enough to rob her of her jewels, and force her to be his accomplice in the ruin of an innocent young man! For did not the letter before him assert this to be the fact, and tell him how to convince himself of its truth? M. Fauvel was as bewildered as if he had been knocked on the head with a club. It was impossible for his scattered ideas to take in the enormity of what these dreadful words intimated. He seemed to be mentally and physically paralyzed, as he sat there staring blankly at the letter. But in a few minutes his reason returned.

"What infamous cowardice!" he cried; "it is abominable!" And he angrily crumpled up the letter and threw it into the empty fireplace, adding: "I will forget having read it. I will not soil my mind by letting it dwell upon such turpitude!"

He said this, and he thought it; but, for all that, he could not open the rest of his letters. That penetrating, clinging, all-corroding worm, suspicion, had taken possession of his soul; and he leaned over his desk, with his face buried in his hands, vainly endeavouring to recover his habitual calmness of mind. "Supposing, though, that the letter stated the truth!" At the thought, his dejection of the first few minutes gave way to the most

violent rage. "Ah!" he exclaimed in his wrath, "if I only knew the scoundrel who dared to write this; if I only had him here!" Thinking that the hand-writing might throw some light on the mystery, he picked the fatal letter out of the fireplace. Carefully smoothing it out he laid it on his desk, and studied the up strokes, the down strokes, and the capitals of every word. "It must be from one of my clerks," he thought, "who is angry with me for having refused to raise his salary; or for some other reason." Clinging to this idea, he thought over all the young men in his bank; but not one could he believe capable of resorting to so base a vengeance. Then he wondered where the letter had been posted, thinking this might throw some light on the mystery. He looked at the envelope, and read on the post-mark, "Rue du Cardinal Lemoine." This fact told him nothing. Once more he read the letter through, spelling over each word, and analysing every sentence it contained. It is the custom to treat anonymous letters with silent contempt, as the malicious lies of cowards who dare not say to a man's face what they secretly commit to paper. Yet what innumerable catastrophes can be traced to no other origin. One throws the letters in the fire, but, although the paper is destroyed by the flames, doubts remain, and, like a subtle poison, penetrate the inmost recesses of the mind, weaken its holiest beliefs, and destroy its faith. The wife suspected, no matter how unjustly, is no longer the wife in whom her husband trusted as he would trust himself. Suspicion, no matter whence the source, has irrevocably tarnished the brightness of his idol. Unable to struggle any longer against these conflicting doubts, M. Fauvel determined to resolve them by showing the letter to his wife; but a shocking thought, more torturing than a red-hot iron burning his flesh, made him sink back in his chair in despair. "Suppose it be true!" he muttered to himself; "suppose I have been miserably duped! By confiding in my wife, I shall put her on her guard, and lose all chance of discovering the truth."

Thus were realised all M. Verduret's presumptions. He had said, "If M. Fauvel does not yield to his first impulse, if he stops to reflect, we have time to repair the harm done." And after long and painful meditation, the banker had finally decided to wait and watch his wife. It was a hard struggle for a man of his frank, upright nature, to play the part of a domestic spy, and jealous husband. Accustomed to give way to sudden bursts of anger, but quickly mastering them, he would find it difficult to preserve his self-restraint, to maintain silence until his proofs were overwhelming. There was one simple means of ascertaining the truth. The letter stated that his wife's diamonds had been pawned. If it lied in this instance, he would treat it with the scorn it deserved. But if, on the other hand, it should prove to be true! At this moment, the servant announced that lunch was served, and M. Fauvel looked in the glass before leaving his study, to see if his face betrayed the emotion he felt. He was shocked at the sight of his haggard features. "Shall I be able to control my feelings?" he asked himself. At table he did his utmost to look unconcerned, he talked incessantly, related several stories, hoping thus to distract the attention of the others. But, all the time he was talking, he was casting over in his mind various expedients for getting his wife out of the house long enough for him to search her room. At last he asked Madame Fauvel if she were going out at all that day.

"Yes," she replied, "the weather is dreadful, but Madeleine and I have some pressing matters to see after."

"At what time do you think of starting?"

"Immediately after lunch."

He drew a long breath as if relieved of a great weight. In a short time he would be able to learn the truth. His uncertainty was so torturing to the unhappy man that to it he preferred anything, even the most dreadful reality. Lunch over, he lighted a cigar, but did not remain in the dining-room to smoke it, as was his habit. He went into his study, pretending he had some pressing work to attend to. He took the precaution to send Lucien out so as to be quite alone. After the lapse of half an hour, he heard the carriage drive away with his wife and niece. Hurrying into Madame Fauvel's room, he opened her jewel drawer. Several of the cases he knew she possessed were missing, those that remained—there were ten or twelve of them—were empty. The anonymous letter had told the truth. "Oh, it cannot be!" he gasped in broken tones. "It is not possible!" He wildly pulled open other drawers in the hope of finding the jewels. Perhaps his wife kept them elsewhere. She might have sent some of them to be reset, and others to be mended. But he found nothing! He then recollected the Jandidier ball, and that he, full of pride, had said to his wife: "Why don't you wear your diamonds?" She had smilingly replied: "Oh! what is the use? Everybody knows them so well; I shall be more noticed if I don't wear them; and besides, they wouldn't suit my costume." Yes, she had made this answer without blushing, without showing the slightest sign of agitation. What barefaced impudence! What base hypocrisy concealed beneath an innocent, confiding manner! And she had been thus deceiving him for twenty years! But suddenly a gleam of hope penetrated his confused mind—slight, barely possible; still a straw to cling to—"Perhaps Valentine has put her diamonds in Madeleine's room." Without stopping to consider the indelicacy of what he was about to do, he hurried into the young girl's room, and pulled open one drawer after another. He did not find his wife's—not Madame Fauvel's diamonds—but he discovered seven or eight jewel cases belonging to Madeleine, and all empty. Great heavens! Was this gentle girl, whom he had treated as a daughter, an accomplice in this deed of shame? This last blow was too much for the miserable man. He sank almost lifeless into a chair, and wringing his hands, groaned over the wreck of his happiness. Was this the happy future to which he had looked forward? Was the fabric of his honour, well-being and domestic bliss, to be dashed to the earth and forever lost in a day? Seemingly nothing was changed in his existence; he was not materially injured; the objects around him remained the same; and yet what a commotion had taken place, a commotion more unheard of, more surprising than the changing of night into day. What! Valentine, the pure young girl whom he had so loved and married in spite of her poverty; Valentine, the tender, loving wife, who had become dearer and dearer to him as years rolled on; could she have been deceiving him? She, the mother of his sons! His sons? Bitter thought! Were they his sons? If she could deceive him now when she was silver-haired had she not deceived him when she was young? Not only did he suffer in the present, but the uncertainty of the past tortured his soul.

M. Fauvel did not long remain in this dejected state. Anger and a thirst for vengeance gave him fresh strength, and he determined to sell his past happiness dearly. He well knew that the fact of the diamonds being missing was not sufficient ground upon which to base an accusation. But he had plenty of means of procuring other proofs. He began by calling his valet, and ordering him to bring to him every letter that should come to

the house. He then telegraphed to a notary at St. Remy, for minute and authentic information about the De Lagors family, and especially about Raoul. Finally, following the advice of the anonymous letter, he went to the Préfecture of Police, hoping to obtain De Clameran's biography. But the police, fortunately for many people, are as discreetly silent as the grave. They guard their secrets as a miser his treasure. Nothing but an order from the Public Prosecutor could reveal the secrets of those terrible green boxes which are kept in an apartment by themselves, guarded like a banker's strong-room. M. Fauvel was politely asked what motives urged him to inquire into the past life of a French citizen; and, as he declined to state his reasons, he was told he had better apply to the above-mentioned functionary. This advice he could not follow. He had sworn that the secret of his wrongs should be confined to the three persons interested. He chose to avenge his own injuries, to be alone the judge and executioner. He returned home more enraged than ever; there he found a telegram answering the one which he had sent to St. Remy. It was as follows: "The De Lagors are very poor, and there has never been any member of the family named Raoul. Madame De Lagors has no son, only two daughters." This information was the final blow. The banker thought, when he discovered his wife's infamy, that she had sinned as deeply as woman could sin; but he now saw that she had practised a deception more shocking than the crime itself.

"Wretched creature!" he cried with anguish; "in order to see her lover constantly, she dared present him to me under the name of a nephew who never existed. She had the shameless courage to introduce him beneath my roof, and seat him at my fireside, between myself and my sons; and I, confiding fool that I was, welcomed the villain, and lent him money."

Nothing could equal the pain of wounded pride and mortification which he suffered at the thought that Raoul and Madame Fauvel had amused themselves with his good-natured credulity. Nothing but death could wipe out an injury of this nature. But the very bitterness of his resentment enabled him to restrain himself until the time for punishment came. With grim satisfaction he promised himself that his acting would be as successful as theirs. That day he succeeded in concealing his agitation, and kept up a flow of talk during the whole time the dinner lasted. But at about nine o'clock, when De Clameran called, he hastened from the house, for fear that he would be unable to control his indignation, and did not return home until late in the night. The next day he reaped the fruit of his prudence. Among the letters which his valet brought him at noon, was one bearing the post-mark of Vésinet. He carefully opened the envelope, and read, "DEAR AUNT,—It is imperatively necessary for me to see you to-day; so I expect you. I will explain why I am prevented from calling at your house. **RAOUL.**"

"I have them now!" cried M. Fauvel, trembling with satisfaction at the near prospect of vengeance. Eager to lose no time, he opened a drawer, took out a revolver, and examined the hammer to see if it worked easily. He certainly imagined himself alone, but a vigilant eye was watching his movements. Nina immediately upon her return from the Grand Archangel, stationed herself at the key-hole of the study-door, and saw all that occurred. M. Fauvel laid the weapon on the mantle-piece, and nervously revealed the letter, which he then took to the place where the letters were usually left, not wishing his wife to know that Raoul's letter had passed through his hands. He was only absent a few minutes, but inspired by the

imminence of the danger, Nina darted into the study, and rapidly extracted the cartridges from the revolver. "By this means," she murmured, "the immediate peril is averted, and M. Verduret will now perhaps have time to act. I must send Cavillon to tell him what is happening."

She hurried downstairs, and sent the clerk with a message, telling him to leave it with Madame Alexandre, if M. Verduret had left the hotel. An hour later, Madame Fauvel ordered her carriage, and went out. M. Fauvel jumped into a hackney-coach, and followed her.

"God grant that M. Verduret may be in time!" said Nina to herself, "otherwise Madame Fauvel and Raoul are lost."

XXIV.

THE day that the Marquis de Clameran perceived that Raoul de Lagors was the only obstacle between him and Madeleine, he swore that the obstacle should be removed. He at once took steps for the accomplishment of his purpose. As Raoul was walking home at Vésinet about midnight, he was assailed at a lonely spot not far from the station by three men, who, determined, so they said, to see the time by his watch, fell upon him suddenly, and but for Raoul's wonderful strength and agility, would have left him dead on the spot. As it was, he soon, by his skilfully plied blows, for he was a proficient in fencing, and had learnt boxing in England, made his enemies take to their heels. He quietly continued his walk home, fully determined in future, to be well armed when he went out at night. He never for an instant suspected his accomplice of having instigated the assault. But two days afterwards, while sitting in a café he frequented, a burly, vulgar-looking man, a stranger to him, tried to draw him into a quarrel about nothing, and finally threw a card in his face, saying he was ready to grant him satisfaction when and where he pleased. Raoul rushed towards the man to chastise him on the spot; but his friends held him back.

"Very well, then," said he; "be at home to-morrow morning, sir, and I will send two of my friends to you." As soon as the stranger had left, Raoul recovered from his excitement, and began to wonder what could have been the motive for this evidently premeditated insult. Picking up the card of the bully, he read:

W. H. B. JACOBSON.

Formerly Garibaldian volunteer.

Ex-staff-officer of the armies of the South.

(Italy, America).

30, Rue Leonie.

"Oh! oh!" thought Raoul, "this glorious soldier may very possibly have won his laurels in a fencing school!"

Still the insult had been offered in the presence of others; and, no matter who the offender was, it must be noticed. Raoul requested two of his friends to call on M. Jacobson early the next morning, and make arrangements for the duel. It was settled that they should render him an account of their mission at the Hotel du Louvre, where he arranged to sleep. Everything being arranged, Raoul went out to find out something about M. Jacobson. He was an expert at the business, but he had considerable trouble. The information he obtained was not very promising. M. Jacobson, who lived in a very suspicious-looking little hotel, frequented chiefly by women of loose character, was described to him as an eccentric

gentleman, whose means of livelihood was a problem difficult to solve. He reigned despotically at an ordinary near by, went out a great deal, came home very late, and seemed to have no capital to live upon, save his military titles, his talent for entertaining, and a notable quantity of various expedients.

"That being his character," thought Raoul, "I cannot see what object he can have in picking a quarrel with me. What good will it do him to run a sword through my body? Not the slightest; and, moreover, his pugnacious conduct is apt to attract the attention of the police, who, from what I hear, are the last people this warrior would like to have after him. Therefore, for acting as he has done, he must have some reasons which are unable to discern."

The result of his meditations was, that Raoul, upon his return to the Hotel du Louvre, did not mention a word of his adventure to De Clameran whom he still found up. At half-past eight his seconds arrived. M. Jacobson had agreed to fight, and had chosen the sword; but it must be that very hour, in the Bois de Vincennes. Raoul felt very uneasy, nevertheless he boldly said: "I accept the gentleman's conditions." They went to the place decided upon, and after an interchange of a few thrusts Raoul was slightly wounded in the right shoulder. The "Ex-staff-office of the armies of the South" wished to continue the combat; but Raoul's seconds—brave young men—declared that honour was satisfied, and that they had no intention of subjecting their friend's life to unnecessary hazards. The ex-officer was forced to submit, and unwillingly retired from the field. Raoul went home delighted at having escaped with nothing more serious than a little loss of blood, and resolved to keep clear of all so-called Garibaldians in the future. In fact, a night's reflection had convinced him that De Clameran was the instigator of the two attempts on his life. Madame Fauvel having told him what conditions Madeleine placed on her consent to marry, Raoul instantly saw how necessary his removal would be, now that he was an impediment in the way of De Clameran's success. He recalled a thousand insignificant events of the last few days, and, on skilfully questioning the marquis, had his suspicions changed into certainty. This conviction that the man whom he had so materially assisted in his criminal plans, had hired assassins to make away with him, made him mad with rage. This treason seemed, to him, monstrous. He was as yet not sufficiently experienced in ruffianism to know that one villain always sacrifices another to advance his own projects; he was credulous enough to believe in the old adage, of "honour amongst thieves." His rage was naturally mingled with fright, well knowing that his life hung by a thread, when it was threatened by a daring scoundrel like De Clameran. He had twice miraculously escaped; a third attempt would more than likely prove fatal. Knowing his accomplice's nature, Raoul saw himself surrounded by snares; he saw death before him in every form; he was equally afraid of going out, and of remaining at home. He only ventured with the most suspicious caution into the most public places; he feared poison as much as the assassin's knife, and imagined that every dish placed before him tasted of strychnine. This life of torture was intolerable, so with a desire for revenge as much as with a view of securing his personal safety, he determined to anticipate a struggle which he felt must terminate in the death of either De Clameran or himself. "Better kill the devil," said he, "than be killed by him." In his days of poverty, Raoul had often risked his liberty to obtain a few guineas, and would not have hesitated to make short work of

a person like De Clameran. But with money prudence had come. He wished to enjoy his four hundred thousand francs without being compromised by committing a murder which might be discovered; he therefore began to devise some other means of getting rid of his dreaded accomplice. In the meantime, he thought it would be a good thing to thwart De Clameran's marriage with Madeleine. He was sure that he would thus strike him to the heart, and this was at least a satisfaction. Raoul was persuaded that, by openly siding with Madeleine and her aunt, he could save them from De Clameran's clutches. Having fully resolved upon this course, he wrote a note to Madame Fauvel asking for an interview. The poor woman hastened to Vésinet convinced that some new misfortune was in store for her. Her alarm was groundless. She found Raoul more tender and affectionate than he had ever been. He saw the necessity of re-assuring her, and winning his old place in her forgiving heart, before making his disclosures. He succeeded. The poor lady had a smiling and happy look as she sat in an arm chair, with Raoul kneeling beside her.

"I have distressed you too long, my dear mother," he said in his softest tones; "but I repent sincerely: now listen to me."

He had not time to say more; the door was violently thrown open, and Raoul, springing to his feet, was confronted by M. Fauvel. The banker had a revolver in his hand, and was ghastly pale. It was evident that he was making superhuman efforts to remain calm, like a judge whose duty it is to justly punish crime.

"Ah," he exclaimed with a horrible laugh, "you look surprised. You did not expect me? You thought that my imbecile credulity assured you an eternal impunity!"

Raoul had the courage to place himself before Madame Fauvel, and to stand prepared to receive the expected bullet.

"I assure you, uncle," he began.

"Enough!" interrupted the banker with an angry gesture, "let me hear no more infamous falsehoods! End this odious comedy, of which I am no longer the dupe."

"I swear to you—"

"Spare yourself the trouble of denying anything. Do you not see that I know all. I know who pawned my wife's diamonds. I know who committed the robbery for which an innocent man was arrested and imprisoned!"

Madame Fauvel, white with terror, fell upon her knees. At last it had come—the dreadful day had come. Vainly had she added falsehood to falsehood; vainly had she sacrificed herself and others: all was discovered. She saw that she was lost, and wringing her hands, with her face bathed in tears, she moaned: "Pardon, André! I beg you, forgive me!"

At these heart-broken tones, the banker shook like a leaf. This voice brought before him the twenty years of happiness which he had owed to this woman, who had always been the mistress of his heart, whose slightest wish had been his law, and who, by a smile or a frown, could make him the happiest or the most miserable of men. Could this wretched woman crouching at his feet be his beloved Valentine, the pure, innocent girl whom he had found secluded in the château of La Verberie? Could this be the cherished wife whom he had worshipped for so many years? In the memory of his lost happiness never to return, he seemed to forget the present, and was almost melted to forgiveness.

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"Unhappy woman," he murmured, "unhappy woman! What had I

done that you should thus deceive me? Ah, my only fault was loving you too deeply, and letting you see it. One wearies of everything in this world, even happiness. Did pure domestic joys pall upon you, and weary you, driving you to seek the excitement of sinful passion? Were you so tired of the atmosphere of respect and affection which surrounded you, that you must needs risk your honour and mine by braving public opinion? Oh, into what an abyss you have fallen, Valentine! If you were wearied by my constant devotion, had the thought of your children no power to restrain your evil passions?"

M. Fauvel spoke slowly, with painful effort, as if each word choked him. Raoul, who listened with attention, saw that if the banker knew some things, he certainly did not know all. He saw that erroneous information had misled the unhappy man, and that he was a victim of false appearances. He determined to convince him of the mistake under which he was labouring.

"Sir," he began, "will you consent to listen—"

But the sound of Raoul's voice was sufficient to break the charm. "Silence!" cried the banker with an angry oath; "silence!"

For some moments nothing was heard but the sobs of Madame Fauvel.

"I came here," continued the banker, "with the intention of surprising and killing you both. I have surprised you, but—my courage, yes my courage fails me—I cannot kill an unarmed man."

Raoul once more tried to speak.

"Let me finish!" interrupted M. Fauvel. "Your life is in my hands; the law excuses the vengeance of an outraged husband, but I refuse to take advantage of it. I see on your mantle-piece a revolver similar to mine; take it, and defend yourself."

"Never!"

"Defend yourself!" cried the banker raising his weapon, "if you do not—"

Seeing the barrel of M. Fauvel's revolver close to his breast, Raoul in self-defence seized his own and prepared to fire.

"Stand in that corner of the room, and I will stand in this," continued the banker; "and when the clock strikes, which will be in a few seconds, we will both fire together."

They took the places designated, and stood perfectly still. But the horror of the scene was too much for Madame Fauvel to witness it any longer without interposing. She understood but one thing: her son and her husband were about to kill each other before her eyes. Fright and horror gave her strength to rise and rush between the two men.

"For God's sake, have mercy, André?" she cried, turning to her husband and wringing her hands with anguish; "let me tell you everything; don't kill him."

M. Fauvel mistook this burst of maternal love, for the pleadings of an adulterous wife defending her lover. He roughly seized his wife by the arm, and thrust her aside: "Get out of the way!" he cried.

But she would not be repulsed; rushing up to Raoul, she threw her arms around him, and said to her husband: "Kill me, and me alone; for I alone am guilty."

At these words M. Fauvel's rage knew no bounds, he deliberately took aim at the guilty pair, and fired. As neither Raoul nor Madame Fauvel fell, the banker fired a second time; then a third. He was preparing for a fourth shot, when a man rushed into the room, snatched the revolver from

the banker's hand, and, throwing him on the sofa, ran towards Madame Fauvel. This man was M. Verduret, who had been warned by Cavillon, but who did not know that Nina had withdrawn the charges from M. Fauvel's weapon.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, "she is unhurt."

But the banker had already regained his feet. "Leave me alone," he cried struggling to get free, "I will have vengeance!"

M. Verduret seized his wrists in a vice-like grasp, and in a solemn tone, so as to give more weight to his words, he said: "Thank God you are saved from committing a terrible crime; the anonymous letter deceived you."

M. Fauvel never once thought of asking this stranger who he was and where he came from. He heard and understood but one fact: the anonymous letter had lied. "But my wife confesses her guilt," he stammered.

"Yes," replied M. Verduret, "but not of the crime you imagine. Do you know who that man is, that you wish to kill?"

"Her lover!"

"No: her son!"

The presence of this well-informed stranger, seemed to confound Raoul and to frighten him more than M. Fauvel's threats had done. Yet he had sufficient presence of mind to say: "It is the truth!"

The banker looked wildly from Raoul to M. Verduret; then, fastening his haggard eyes on his wife exclaimed: "What you tell me is not possible! Give me proofs!"

"You shall have proofs," replied M. Verduret, "but first listen."

And rapidly, with his wonderful talent for exposition, he related the principal events of the drama he had discovered. The true state of the case was terribly distressing to M. Fauvel, but nothing compared with what he had suspected. His throbbing, yearning heart told him that he still loved his wife. Why should he punish a fault committed so very long ago, and atoned for by twenty years of devotion and suffering? For some moments after M. Verduret had finished his explanation, M. Fauvel remained silent. So many strange events had happened, following each other in such quick succession, and culminating in the shocking scene which had just taken place, that M. Fauvel seemed to be too bewildered to think clearly. If his heart counselled pardon and forgetfulness, wounded pride and self-respect demanded vengeance. If Raoul, the baleful witness, the living proof of a far-off sin, were not in existence, M. Fauvel would not have hesitated. Gaston de Clameran was dead; he would have held out his arms to his wife, saying: "Come to my heart! your sacrifices for my honour shall be your absolution; let the sad past be forgotten." But the sight of Raoul froze the words upon his lips.

"So this is your son," said he to his wife, "this man, who has plundered you and robbed me!"

Madame Fauvel was unable to utter a word in reply to these reproachful words.

"Oh!" said M. Verduret, "madame will tell you that this young man is the son of Gaston de Clameran; she has never doubted it. But, the truth is—"

"What!"

"That, in order to swindle her more easily, he has perpetrated a gross imposture."

During the last few minutes Raoul had been quietly creeping towards the

door hoping to escape while no one was thinking of him. But M. Verduret, who anticipated his intention, was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and stopped him just as he was about leaving the room. "Not so fast, my pretty youth," he said, dragging him into the middle of the apartment; "it is not polite to leave us so unceremoniously. Let us have a little explanation before parting!"

M. Verduret's jeering words and mocking manner were a revelation for Raoul. "The merry-andrew!" he gasped starting back with an affrighted look.

"The same my friend," said the stout man. "Ah, now that you recognise me, I confess that the merry-andrew and myself are one and the same; here is proof of it." And turning up his sleeve he showed his bare arm. "I think that this recent wound will convince you of my identity," he continued. "I imagine you know the villain that gave me this little decoration, that night I was walking along the Rue Bourdaloue. That being the case, you know, I have a slight claim upon you, and shall expect you to relate to us your little story." But Raoul was so terrified that he could not utter a word. "Your modesty prevents your speaking," said M. Verduret. "Bravo! modesty belongs to talent, and for one of your age you certainly have displayed a talent for knavery."

M. Fauvel listened without understanding a word of what was said. "Into what abyss of shame have we fallen!" he groaned. "Re-assure yourself, sir," replied M. Verduret in a serious tone. "After what I have been constrained to tell you, what remains to be said is a mere trifle. This is the end of the story. On leaving Mignon, who had given him a full account of the misfortunes of Mademoiselle Valentine de La Verberie, De Clameran hastened to London. He had no difficulty in finding the farmer's wife to whom the old countess had intrusted Gaston's son. But here an unexpected disappointment greeted him. He learned that the child, who was registered on the parish books as Raoul-Valentin Wilson, had died of the croup when eighteen months old."

Raoul tried to protest. "Did any one dare say that?" he commenced.

"It was not only stated, but proved, my pretty youth," replied M. Verduret. "You don't suppose I am a man to trust to mere gossip; do you?" He drew from his pocket several stamped documents, and laid them on the table. "These are the declarations of the nurse, her husband, and four witnesses. Here is an extract from the registry of births; this is a certificate of registry of death; and all these are authenticated at the French Embassy. Now are you satisfied, young man?"

"What next?" inquired M. Fauvel.

"De Clameran," replied M. Verduret, "finding that the child was dead, supposed that he could, in spite of this disappointment, obtain money from Madame Fauvel; he was mistaken. His first attempt failed. Having an inventive turn of mind, he determined that the child should come to life again. Among his large circle of rascally acquaintance, he selected the young fellow who stands before you."

Madame Fauvel was in a pitiable state. And yet she began to feel a ray of hope; her acute anxiety had so long tortured her, that the truth was a relief. "Can this be possible?" she murmured, "can it be?"

"What!" cried the banker: "can an infamous plot like this be planned in the present day?"

"All this is false!" said Raoul boldly.

"M. Verduret turned to Raoul, and, bowing with ironical respect, said:

"You desire proofs, sir, do you? You shall certainly have convincing ones. I have just left a friend of mine, M. Pâlot, who brought me valuable information from London. Now, my young gentleman, I will tell you the little story he told me, and then you can give your opinion of it. In 1847 Lord Murray, a wealthy and generous nobleman, had a jockey named Spencer, of whom he was very fond. At the Epsom races this jockey was thrown from his horse, and killed. Lord Murray grieved over the loss of his favourite, and having no children of his own, declared his intention of adopting Spencer's son, who was then but four years old. Thus James Spencer was brought up in affluence, as heir to the immense wealth of the noble Lord. He was a handsome, intelligent boy, and gave satisfaction to his protector until he was sixteen years of age, when he became intimate with a worthless set of people, and went to the bad. Lord Murray, who was very indulgent, pardoned many grave faults; but one fine morning he discovered that his adopted son had been imitating his signature upon some cheques. He indignantly dismissed him from his house, and told him never to show his face there again. James Spencer had been living in London about four years, managing to support himself by gambling and swindling, when he met De Clameran, who offered him twenty-five thousand francs to play a part in a little comedy which he had himself arranged."

"You are a detective!" interrupted Raoul, not caring to hear any more.

The stout man smiled blandly.

"At present," he replied, "I am merely Prosper Bertomy's friend. It depends entirely upon yourself, as to which character I shall hereafter appear in."

"What do you require me to do?"

"Where are the three hundred and fifty thousand francs which you have stolen."

The young rascal hesitated a moment, and then said: "The money is here."

"Very good. This frankness will be of service to you. I know that the money is in this room, and also that it is at the bottom of that cupboard. Do you intend to refund it?"

Raoul saw that his game was lost. He tremblingly went to the cupboard, and pulled out several rolls of bank-notes, and an enormous package of pawnbroker's tickets.

"Very well done," said M. Verduret, as he carefully examined the money and papers: "this is the most sensible step you ever took."

Raoul relied on this moment, when everybody's attention would be absorbed by the money, to make his escape. He crept towards the door, gently opened it, slipped out, and locked it, for the key was on the outside.

"He has escaped!" cried M. Fauvel.

"Of course," replied M. Verduret, without even looking up: "I thought he would have sense enough to do that."

"But is he to go unpunished?"

"My dear sir, would you have this affair become a public scandal? Do you wish your wife's name's to be brought into a case of this nature at the police court?"

"Oh! sir."

"Then the best thing you can do, is to let the rascal go. Here are receipts for all the articles which he has pawned, so that we should consider ourselves fortunate. He has kept fifty thousand francs, but that is all the

better for you. That sum will enable him to leave France, and we shall never see him again."

Like every one else, M. Fauvel yielded to M. Verduret's ascendancy. Gradually he had awakened to the true state of affairs; prospective happiness no longer seemed impossible, and he felt that he was indebted to the man before him for more than life. With earnest gratitude he seized M. Verduret's hand as if to carry it to his lips, and said in broken tones: "Oh, sir! how can I ever find words to express how deeply I appreciate your kindness? How can I ever repay the great service you have rendered me?"

M. Verduret reflected a moment, and then replied: "If you consider yourself under any obligations to me, sir, I have a favour to ask of you."

"A favour, you! ask of me? Speak, sir you have but to name it. My fortune and my life are at your disposal."

"I will not hesitate, then, to explain myself. I am Prosper's friend. You can restore him to his former honourable position. You can do so much for him, sir! he loves Mademoiselle Madeleine—"

"Madeleine shall be his wife, sir," interrupted the banker: "I give you my word. And I will so publicly exonerate him, that not a shadow of suspicion will ever rest upon his name."

The stout man quietly took up his hat and cane, as if he had been paying an ordinary call. "You will excuse my importuning you," said he, "but Madame Fauvel—"

"André!" murmured the wretched woman, "André!"

The banker hesitated a moment, then, following the impulse of his heart, ran to his wife, and, clasping her in his arms, said tenderly: "No, I will not be foolish enough to struggle against my heart. I do not pardon, Valentine: I forget; I forget all!"

M. Verduret had nothing more to do at Vésinet. Without taking leave of the banker, he quietly left the room, and, jumping into his cab, ordered the driver to return to Paris, and drive to the Hotel du Louvre as rapidly as possible. His mind was filled with anxiety. He knew that Raoul would give him no more trouble; the young rogue was probably far off by that time. But De Clameran should not escape unpunished; and how this punishment could be brought about without compromising Madame Fauvel, was the problem to be solved. M. Verduret thought over various expedients, but not one could be applied to the present circumstances. After long thought he decided that an accusation of poisoning must be made at Oloron. He would go there and work upon "public opinion," so that, to satisfy the townspeople the authorities would order a post-mortem examination of Gaston's body. But this mode of proceeding required time; and De Clameran would certainly escape before long. He was bemoaning his inability to come to a satisfactory decision, when the cab stopped in front of the Hotel du Louvre. It was almost dark. A crowd of people was collected round about the entrance, eagerly discussing some exciting event which seemed to have just taken place.

"What has happened?" asked M. Verduret of one of the crowd.

"The strangest thing you have ever heard of," replied the man; "yes, I saw it with my own eyes. He first appeared at that seventh-story window; he was only half dressed. Some men tried to seize him; but bah! with the agility of a squirrel, he jumped out upon the roof, shrieking, 'Murder! murder!' The recklessness of his conduct led me to suppose—" The gossip stopped short in his narrative, very much surprised and vexed; his questioner had vanished.

"If it should be De Clameran!" thought M. Verduret; "if terror has deranged that brain, so capable of working out great crimes!"

While thus talking to himself, he elbowed his way into the court-yard of the hotel. At the foot of the principal staircase he found M. Fanferlot and three peculiar-looking individuals waiting together.

"Well!" cried M. Verduret, "what is the matter?"

With laudable precision, the four men stood at attention. "The chief!" said they.

"Come!" said the stout man with an oath. "What has happened?"

"This is what has happened, sir," said Fanferlot dejectedly. "I am doomed to ill luck. You see how it is: this is the only chance I ever had of working out a beautiful case, and, puff! my criminal goes and sells me."

"Then it is De Clameran who—"

"Of course it is. When the rascal saw me this morning, he scampered off like a hare. You should have seen him run; I thought he would never stop this side of Ivry; but not at all. On reaching the Boulevard des Ecoles, a sudden idea seemed to strike him, and he made a bee-line for his hotel; I suppose, to secure his pile of money. Directly he gets here, what does he see? these three friends of mine. The sight of these gentlemen had the effect of a sunstroke upon him; he went raving mad on the spot."

"Where is he now?"

"At the Prefecture, I suppose. Some policemen handcuffed him, and drove off with him in a cab."

"Come with me."

M. Verduret and Fanferlot found De Clameran in one of the private cells reserved for dangerous prisoners. He had on a strait-waistcoat, and was struggling violently against three men, who were striving to hold him, while a physician tried to force him to swallow a potion.

"Help!" he shrieked; "help for God's sake! Do you not see my brother coming after me? Look! he wants to poison me!"

M. Verduret took the physician aside, and asked him a few questions.

"The wretched man is in a hopeless state," replied the doctor; "this species of insanity is incurable. He thinks some one is trying to poison him, and nothing will persuade him to eat or drink anything; he will die of starvation, after having suffered all the tortures of poison."

M. Verduret shuddered as he left the Prefecture. "Madame Fauvel is saved," he murmured, "since God has himself punished De Clameran!"

"That doesn't help me in the least," grumbled Fanferlot. "The idea of all my trouble and labour ending in this way!"

"True," replied M. Verduret, "the Dossier No. 113 will never leave its portfolio. But console yourself; before the end of the month I will give you a letter to a friend of mine, and what you have lost in fame you will gain in gold."

XXV.

ONE morning, four days later, M. Lecoq--the official Lecoq, who resembles the head of a department, was walking up and down his private office, looking at the clock at every moment. At last, a bell rang, and the faithful Janouille ushered in Madame Nina and Prosper Bertomy.

"Ah," said M. Lecoq, "you are punctual, my fond lovers, that is well."

"We are not lovers, sir," replied Madame Gipsy. "Only M. Verduret's express orders have united us here to meet him."

"Very well," said the celebrated detective; "then be kind enough to wait a few minutes: I will tell him you are here."

During the quarter of an hour that Nina and Prosper remained alone together, they did not exchange a word. Finally a door opened, and M. Verduret appeared.

Nina and Prosper eagerly started towards him; but he checked them by one of those looks which no one ever dared resist. "You have come," he said severely, "to hear the secret of my conduct. I have promised, and will keep my word, however painful it may be to my feelings. Listen, then. My best friend is a loyal, honest fellow, named Caldas. Eighteen months ago this friend was the happiest of men. Infatuated by a woman, he lived for her alone, and, fool that he was, imagined that as she owed all to him, she loved him."

"Yes!" cried Nina, "yes, she loved him!"

"So be it. She loved him so much, that one fine night she went off with another man. In his first moments of despair, Caldas wished to kill himself. Then he reflected that it would be wiser to live, and avenge himself."

"But then—" faltered Prosper.

"Then Caldas avenged himself in his own way. He made the woman who deceived him recognise his immense superiority over his rival. Weak, timid, and without intelligence, the latter was disgraced and falling into the abyss, when Caldas's powerful hand saved him. For you have understood, have you not? The woman is Nina; the seducer is yourself; and Caldas is—"

With a quick, dexterous movement, he threw off his wig and whiskers, and stood before them the real, intelligent and proud Lecoq.

"Caldas!" cried Nina.

"No, not Caldas, nor Verduret either, but Lecoq, the detective!"

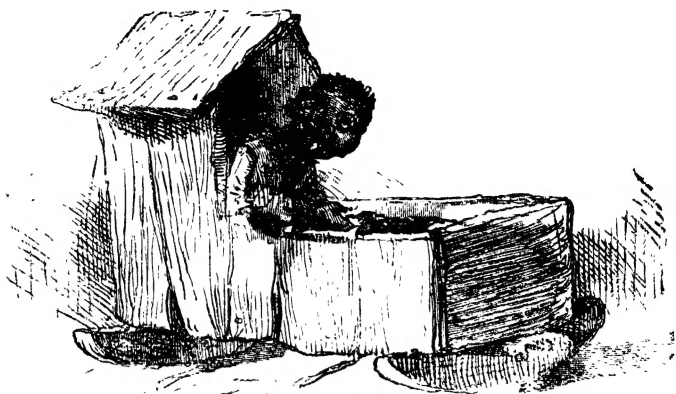
There was a moment of astonished silence, then M. Lecoq turned to Prosper and said: "It is not to me alone that you owe your salvation. A noble girl in confiding in me rendered my task easy. I mean Mademoiselle Madeleine; I promised her that M. Fauvel should never know anything, Your letter made it impossible for me to keep my promise. That is all."

He turned to leave the room, but Nina stopped him. "Caldas," she murmured, "I implore you to have pity on me! I am so miserable? Ah, if you only knew! Be forgiving to one who has always loved you, Caldas! Listen—"

Prosper departed from M. Lecoq's office alone.

On the 15th of last month, was celebrated, at the church of Notre Dame de Lorette, the marriage of M. Prosper Bertomy and Mademoiselle Madeleine Fauvel.

The banking-house is still in the Rue de Provence; but as M. Fauvel has decided to retire from business, and live in the country, the name of the firm has been changed, and is now: "Prosper Bertomy & Co."



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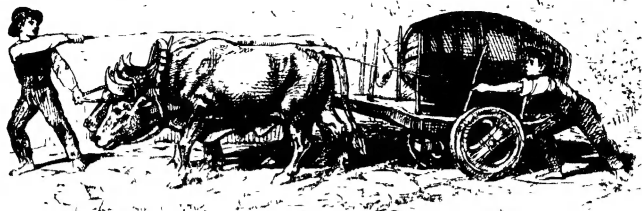
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